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Making A Difference : Service User and carer involvement in Social Work Education – a mixed methods approach within a participatory paradigm.

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Making A Difference : Service User and carer involvement in Social Work Education – a mixed methods approach within a participatory paradigm.

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Abstract

Social work is committed to challenging inequality and discrimination, supporting social justice and valuing diversity throughout the world. Unique to the United Kingdom is the formal recognition of the involvement of those in receipt of services or providing informal carer support as an essential part of social work training. Since this commitment to involvement was established in 2003 with the introduction of the new degree in social work, a wide and variable range of activities has developed across universities to involve people with experiences of social work services. Research to evaluate the effectiveness of involvement has found that evidence of practice impact is limited. Further, research has identified that university structures have not been inclusive of those most marginalised in society.

This qualitative research study explores a key question emanating from those with lived experiences who have contributed to social work education, as well as researchers who have identified a knowledge gap; *what difference does involvement make in social work education?*

Five focus groups, predominantly including those who have contributed to social work education from their lived experiences, social work students , qualified social workers and lecturers, were conducted across the UK. The methodological design employed a triangulated approach to evaluate the impact of involvement through the university curriculum and to introduce an innovative 'Mend the Gap' participatory action research (PAR) approach. Three PAR projects involving participants with lived experiences who felt most excluded from traditional structures in society along with social work students and qualified social workers, promoted methods of mutual learning leading to transformative outcomes. Both research methods align with a pedagogical idea that people need to step out of dichotomous categories, such as 'social workers' 'service users', to close the division which maintains people in roles as 'expert' professional and person 'being helped' with the problem. The work of Paulo Freire (1970) provides the pedagogical framework to explore core themes of power, empowerment, oppression and critical awareness. The findings have demonstrated how the contradiction Freire highlights between the 'oppressor and oppressed' is overcome through the mutual learning process.

The triangulated research findings cohere through application of Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) reflexive thematic analysis resulting in the identification of core themes. A new method for co-producing knowledge and learning and recommendations that build upon existing research for instigating change within social work educational structures is presented. The transferability of findings to other professional contexts adds to the value of the research contribution within the social sciences. The benefits of substantive mutual learning and how boundaries can be transcended through sharing experiential knowledge is emphasised. Most significantly, outcomes of the research demonstrate how transformation is achievable when those who feel most marginalised and stigmatised initiate the agenda. Altogether, the findings present a strong case for restructuring social work education, promoting outcome based meaningful engagement of diverse communities by putting service user- led organisations in control of an academic dominated agenda.

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Signed.

H. M. Casey

Helen Casey

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my partner Simon for his love support, patience, proof reading and helpful conversations. It has been so much nicer to be able to share this journey with you.

Dedicated to my children, Dan and Martha xx

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Chapter One

1.1 Introduction.

In this chapter I introduce the key components of this thesis and set it in its wider context. I start with the background to the study, incorporating my personal and professional interests and how these experiences have led to my curiosity to explore the research topic. The aims of the study are introduced including the main research question upon which this thesis is based. Key themes are identified to introduce core elements of the study. In the final section of the introductory chapter, I outline the structure of the thesis to provide a clear framework for the reader to follow.

1.2 Background.

The rationale for my research comes from a background of social work practice and education in which policy and legislation has developed to promote the involvement of service users and carers in processes which impact upon their lives.

As a social work student in the 1990's I was impressed with the way that service users were involved in our education. (Notably this informal best practice method for involvement preceded the formal recognition later gained). Most weeks someone with experience of using services would come into class to tell students about their largely difficult experiences of receiving social work support. The messages given on how not to behave as a social worker made a significant impression on me although discussion amongst students was mixed, often evoking criticisms that service users were being too 'negative'. To me this indicated a division between people's understanding of each other's roles. The aim of service user involvement in teaching was to enable students to reflect upon their own practice. But it mostly seemed to reinforce the distance that existed between service user and practitioner.

When I was working as a qualified social worker, with learning disabled people in institutional settings, service user involvement was barely acknowledged. The focus upon ensuring that service users were central to decision making processes about their lives was key within Community Care legislation (Gov.uk 1990). However, it was not until Valuing People Policy came into force in 2001 (Gov.uk 2001) that people with learning disabilities

living in institutional settings had person centred support to enable them to move from hospital to community settings. I managed to get funding during this time to establish advocacy support services which enabled people to have their voices heard within decision making processes. This led to what were seemingly viewed as radical changes such as having tea outside of scheduled tea breaks and the introduction of new policies to better reflect people's support requirements. That this was deemed radical may well reflect just how institutionalised services were. But crucially, this demonstrated to me how meaningful service user involvement could improve the quality of people's life.

In my move from social work practice into social work education, I was appointed as a lecturer within the new degree with a commitment for service users and carers to be 'involved at all levels of training and education'(Department of Health 2002). I have endeavoured to progress this agenda meaningfully over almost two decades, developing a wide range of activities, resources and methods for participation. Whilst this has felt worthwhile and generated mostly positive feedback from students, service users and carers, I have often questioned how much difference this makes to social work practice. Most importantly, so have many of those who have contributed their time and experiences.

Other commentators whose work I will present in the next chapter have raised similar questions. For example, a Joseph Rowntree report which focussed on how to make user involvement work found that.

'*Big question marks remain about how much change* has *actually been achieved in line with what people say they want. How real is that change? How many people do get actively involved and do they truly reflect the diversity of the population they are part of?*' *(Branfield, Beresford et al, 2006,p.vii).*

A wealth of resources has been developed supporting the values and principles as well as theory and practice of involvement (Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) 2004, General Social Care Council (GSCC) 2007). In my experience, as service user and carer involvement has developed in social work education, models for involvement have tended to emphasise the unequal relationship between social workers supporting service users. Debates around sustaining service user and carer involvement in social work education have focussed on the principles underpinning professional standards (Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC),

2014) and issues of funding (Department of Health (DoH, 2014). Although I was working actively and creatively with adults and young people in a wide range of activities, I was coming to the view that the effectiveness of their participation and wider impact of involvement is unproven. This is reflected in the broader research picture which explores the value, relevance and barriers to participation and provides very limited examples of change. (Branfield, 2009, Brown et al 2008, Carpenter, 2005, Levin, 2004, Molyneux and Irvine 2004, Moriarty and Manthorpe 2013, Webber and Robinson, 2011).

Some researchers (Carr, 2004, Beresford and Boxall, 2012, Driessens et al, 2016) were beginning to question the levels of change and inclusivity being achieved. Meanwhile, a new approach to service user involvement in social work education was developing at Lund University in Sweden which was unique in the way that it brought students and service users together to meet on equal terms in a common educational context. (Denvall, Heule and Kristiansen 2006). This approach became known as 'Gap-Mending' within the newly established international network 'PowerUs' (2012). (An informal network of service users, students, teachers and researchers).

I found out about this approach at the first 'Authenticity to Action' conference (2014) hosted by 'Comensus', a service user /carer volunteer group based at The University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN). I learned that the conceptual basis for the 'gap mending approach', to reflect upon what maintains gaps between people at the receiving end of services and those providing them, recognised the benefits of validating knowledge as equal from the outset. This was key to promoting equal participation, mutual learning and effective outcomes leading to change . It was the focus on outcomes and practical examples of what had changed because of learning together that chimed with the debate in the UK about what was not happening.

I was fortunate to be invited to join a PowerUs event at Lund University to find out more about the approach and explore in more depth the international context for service user and carer involvement. On my return to Northeast England, I was thinking about how the approach could be introduced to young care leavers with whom I had been working. They had been expressing their concern that they were saying the same things about social workers (and other professionals). They had been involved in social worker's training for some years, yet they felt they were repeating the same messages and experiencing no

change in practice. However, an imminent gap presented itself when I visited social work students on placement at a children's centre who were finding that they were not welcome by parents to join their discussion and support groups. This was an opportunity to overcome the presenting barriers between parents who had been separated from their children and student social workers.

From the first voluntary meeting in a children's centre in South Shields, to which nine parents came to discuss the barriers that existed with social workers, the first 'Mend the Gap' project was borne. Parents chose this title to emphasise what they were seeking to do i.e., to mend the gaps that existed between themselves and those in professional support roles. Hearing parents describe how they experienced 'fear', 'mistrust' and 'feeling let down' by social workers highlighted to me that there were significant gaps in practice which we were simply not getting to grips within education. Parents with these experiences did not come into university to talk about them. This project marked the start of beginning to understand why. Eight social work students and one community health nurse student were recruited to the pilot project, achieving a balance of numbers between participants. More extensive information about this pilot project can be found in; Casey, 2015, pp.62-68, Beresford et al in Chiapparini, 2016, pp 69-87.

I shall summarise briefly the impact of the pilot project which marked a turning point in co-producing outcomes with parents.

- A creative writing group was formed and continued to meet beyond the project finished, leading to an award for one participant(Northeast Council on Addictions (NECA) 2017) and publication for two others (Casey et al in McLaughlin et al 2021, pp.496-497).
- Some parents took on paid consultant roles on behalf of social services to meet with other parents in other children's centres and feedback their experiences and concerns. Previous initiatives involved social workers who had sought to ascertain parent's views which failed, as parents explained due to lack of trust.
- The children and families team manager amended the contact supervision policy as a result of dialogue entered with parents and students during the project. This established that the existing practice whereby students observed parent's

interactions, making notes without discussing these, was experienced as intimidating and disempowering by all parties.

- Some parents became involved in classroom-based teaching sessions and together with students presented at social work conferences. Parents explained that they had got so used to feeling ashamed and judged for not being able to care properly for their children, that their views and voices did not matter. Their participation in teaching and learning was as significant turning point.

- Media coverage of the project promoted a positive image of social workers working in partnership with parents. This level of national as well as local interest encouraged parents to believe in the value of their own experiences in new and positive ways. It also contrasted with the bad press that is usually perpetuated about social workers and parents whose children have been removed from them (Butler and Drakeford, 2003).

From this pilot project, I could see how creating the right environment to co-produce knowledge could lead to transformative outcomes. Most significantly, further 'Mend the Gap' projects developed with service users who felt most stigmatised and excluded from expressing their views in their experiences of social workers. Three further projects included children in the 'looked after' system, children experiencing mental health distress and refugee parents. New ground was breaking with people outside of the classroom. As more clearly defined outcomes came from these projects demonstrating the effectiveness of this approach, I felt compelled to explore this new learning method through conducting research. I also felt I had a responsibility to evaluate the effectiveness and outcomes of involvement. My aim to increase epistemological rigour and credibility in an academic context I believe, has the potential to contribute to a much-needed paradigm shift in social work. One that is based on equal contributions, founded on the value of experiential knowledge.

1.3 Aims of Study

The main aim of the study was to examine the effectiveness of service user and carer involvement by posing the main research question, which is:

What difference does service user and carer involvement make in social work education?

And more specifically the aims of the study were two-fold:

- to capture the experiences of those who have directly contributed or experienced involvement in social work education and evaluate the impact of involvement and evidence of change.
- To actively engage in mend the gap projects to identify new knowledge and outcomes and evaluate the impact of these projects and evidence of change.

The overarching aim of my research was to establish a new basis for social work education by developing new lines of involvement which empowers service users and social workers to build dialogue and trust between them. I have sought to build on the ideas of the democratic/citizenship model which emphasises service user participation in all aspects of support and services. (Cameron, 2014, Priestly, 1999, Beresford and Carr 2018).

Whilst the focus of the study was on the UK, it was informed by a wider international context to reflect the shared aims and global values for social work. Social work education in the UK has set an international precedent when (in 2003) service user and carer involvement became a formal requirement , supported with central funding for all qualifying and subsequently post-qualifying education and training, (Branfield 2009). Many other countries are intent on achieving this (McLaughlin et al 2021). I have discovered that the benefits of sharing such goals within the PowerUs network has been to agree joint actions. These include agreeing actions for a global commitment to service user involvement, reflecting the encompassing aims and objectives of the international vision for social work with the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW, 2020).

1.4 Context for Social Work Education.

The study is informed by the policy context for involving service users and carers in processes that impacts on their lives. I shall now outline this to fully appreciate both the strides and struggles made to enable people to take greater control over their lives. Government policy has developed in response to people wanting more say, more control, and shared decision making. The Children's Act (1989) and NHS and Community Care Act (1990) marked a legislative cultural shift towards more person-centred interventions, specifying that people's voices must be heard. Subsequent legislation extended this

concept. The Carers Recognition Act (1995) placed separate focus on carers, providing entitlement to individual assessments for support and ensuring that young carers were recognised and heard as well as adults. The Health and Social Care Act (2001) introduced direct payments for disabled service users. The National Health Service Act (2006) was purportedly aimed at empowering patients and service users in respect of planning the services they needed and any changes to those services. The list continues up to and including the Care Act legislation (2014) Children Act 1989 and 2004, Children and families Act 2014 and Mental Health Act 1983 and updated Act (2007) providing some of the key legislative context for social work today. What is perhaps most pertinent to observe in respect of progressive policies that place service users at the centre, is the ideologies that frame them. There have been concerns raised about a neoliberal ideological agenda underpinning much of the legislation. For example, the guidance introducing the Community Care Act:

'The rational for the reorganisation and empowerment of service users and carers…this redressing of the balance of power is the best guarantee of a continuing improvement in the quality of services.' (Department of Health 1991).

According to Ferguson:

"What the language of the 1990 Act (Community Care) and the guidance surrounding it also reflected, however, was an emerging neoliberal vision of welfare which saw 'dependency' as the greatest evil and which had no hesitation in deploying the disability movement's language of choice, control and empowerment to promote individualised forms of welfare in the context of a social care market." (Ferguson in Beresford and Carr, 2018 p.245)

Thus, it is argued, that the progressive forms of participation that have developed over the past three decades have been driven from a neoliberal agenda that retains dominance. This is in direct conflict with the collective vision for improving services from many service user led organisations and groups, giving rise to growing questioning about how meaningful involvement in health and social care policy and practice is.

"Service providers and researchers have begun to ask what evidence there is that improves services. Service users and their organisations have raised the issue of what they are actually

able to achieve by their involvement and to question the usefulness of getting involved?"
(Branfield and Beresford 2006, p.1)

The rationale for involving people in education to make a difference to the future social work workforce mirrors this debate. As the next chapter explores, studies which have sought to evaluate the impact of involvement on practice, whilst recognising the valued contributions made, conclude that there has been no evidence of improving outcomes in practice (Simons et al 2006, Beresford 2012, Robinson and Webber 2013, MacSporran 2015). The need to develop approaches that evidence the outcomes of involvement have been identified as essential to driving positive change (Robinson and Webber 2013, Beresford, 2018, Driessens et al 2016, McLaughlin et al 2020).

What I find most inspiring is that the activism that led to the changes in policy has stimulated lots of innovative and successful endeavours to shape services. Activism continues to challenge the dominant policy agendas by presenting an alternative based on 'participatory social policy '. As Peter Beresford, an instigator of participatory policy argues.

"If historically the analysis of social policy was the restricted province of the policymakers, politicians, bureaucrats, academics and researchers who were also centrally involved in its construction, participatory policy demands a much wider range of stakeholders, notably those who are the subjects of, receive work in and pay for social policy".(Beresford,2018, p.2).

This concept of a wide group of stakeholders having the capacity to disrupt and challenge traditional 'expert' views is incorporated in my research. By including Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology as co- researcher and catalyst I have invited people to participate 'as owners of their own knowledge...empowered to take action' (Rhamen and Fals -Borda, 1991). This approach is rooted in the work of Paulo Freire (1970) whereby people are accepted as agents rather than objects, capable of analysing their own situations and designing their own solutions. I have found that applying the gap mending concept to PAR methodology, is a means to achieving 'conscientization' whereby people are empowered through the process of constructing and using their own knowledge for their own benefit. (Freire, 1970). Freire's ideas are highly relevant to social work, as Leonard, who

took a lead on developing the social work course at Warwick University within a Freirean approach explains:

"*The role of the critical social worker was to be committed to conscientization, to enabling service users and others experiencing oppression to develop their consciousness of the structural forces which shaped their lives and their deprivations. No longer would the social worker reinforce the official state definitions of social problems which focused on individual, family, or community pathology, but would resist them and help others to do the same, individually and collectively* ". (Leonard, 1993 cited in Hegel, 2012, p.12).

I have approached my research through a Freirean lens. The context for social work education and practice seems to be one that is always undergoing review and change. Sometimes this is instigated by crises that lead to review and reform, for example the tragic death of 'Baby P' led to changes within child protection services (Munroe, 2011). Financial crises instigate 'austerity' policies lead to welfare reform in social work (Ferguson and Lavallette, 2013). The implications for social workers training in such climates regularly brings the education curriculum under scrutiny.

Whist seeking to avoid presenting a history of social work (which has been exceptionally well documented by Ann Davis, 2008) I shall now summarise briefly the background for the involvement of service users and carers in social work education. This began with the introduction of the undergraduate degree in 2003, which replaced the Diploma in Social Work (DIPSW). The efforts to involve people with lived experiences informally within the DIPSW period (1991-2001) and earlier qualifications are not discounted. However, it was the formal recognition and requirements for involving service users and carers that marked a significant cultural shift which my research is predicated upon.

One other notable difference the new professional degree introduced was making 'Social Worker' a protected title only to be used by those who registered as a social worker , with a commitment to continuing professional development. The new regulator was the General Social Care Council, (GSCC) established in 2001, taking over the role from the Central Council for Education and Social Work (CCETSW) and becoming the first regulatory body for the profession in 2003. The introduction of the MA in 2004 opened a further route to graduates from other disciplines. Controversial fast track training routes opened starting with 'Step Up

to Social Work' 2010 'Frontline' 2014 and 'Think Ahead' 2016. All were criticised by several academics and practitioners for the disproportionate funding they received from Government in contrast to undergraduate and MA courses. Criticisms to Frontline were most condemnatory largely due to its recruitment slogan to recruit the 'brightest and best'.

As Gupta observed:

"Alongside its stated aim to transform social work by improving the workforce with status-driven highflyers, (the recruitment slogan) still comes across as divisive and elitist. The profession already has a lot of great social workers. They need resources to do the work they want and need to do." (Gupta ,2018)

The government expanded its fast-track training routes in response to two reviews of social work. One was undertaken by Professor David Croisdale -Appleby (2014), which focused on social work for adults and was commissioned by the Department of Health. The second was undertaken by Sir Martin Narey which focussed on children's social work for the Department of Education (2014).

The Croisedale Appleby report was praised for its:

"Academic rigour and depth of engagement with a wide range of stakeholders" including service users (BASW, 2015).

In direct contrast, the Narey report was heavily criticised for being based on opinion and judgement rather than factual information, also for making a;

'"full frontal assault on the bodies responsible for the international definition of social work, including the international body which leads on social work education'" (Norman, 2014).

Croisedale Appleby identified that:

- 'To have any validity, proposals about social work education must be rooted in an understanding of the perspectives of the service users (p.3) and that,
- 'HEIs find it difficult to recruit service users who are representative of hard-to-reach groups' (ibid).

Narey largely ignored the central role service users and carers have in educational processes. What united the reports was that they both made the case for radical reform.

Michael Gove had previously been scathing of social work, when in his role as education secretary he pledged to remove the 'dogma' that encouraged graduates to view people they worked with as 'victims of social injustice and inequalities', stating:

"*In too many cases, social work training involves idealistic students being told that the individuals with whom they will work have been disempowered by society…this analysis is, sadly, as widespread as it is pernicious. It robs individuals of the power of agency and breaks the link between an individuals' actions and the consequences. It risks explaining away substance abuse, domestic violence and personal irresponsibility, rather than doing away with them*".

(Maglajlic, 2013, p.25)

This marked a critical juncture in social work education (not for the first time) provoking wide debate and response leading to social action based on practice that seeks to bring about structural changes to mobilise the traditional relationship between service users and social work professionals (Zastrow, 2013). As Peter Beresford put it in a refreshing challenge to Gove.

"*The simple truth about social work, is that is, and has essentially to be **social** work. That is to say, the unique and wonderful contribution it can make, at its best, is to see the person in the round, in their social context, to understand the complex relation of two and bring to bear skills and resource that can help support that person and, in some cases, change their lives*", (Beresford, 2013, p.16)

Amidst the review and reforms of social work came a change in regulator with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) taking over statutory regulation from the GSCC in 2012. This process involved a consultation exercise about whether to retain a commitment to service user and carer involvement in Health and Social Care education. The successful outcome led to the development of a new standard (HCPC SET, 2014) which was then applicable to all sixteen professions that the HCPC regulates. This raised an obvious question for other professions about the impact and effectiveness of involving service users and carers. Thus, highlighting a scant research base lacking clear evidence of outcomes within social work for other professions to learn from.

In parallel with this move to a new regulator 'The College of Social Work' opened its doors in 2012 with the aim; "*to attract significant numbers of social workers to join the College so that they can determine its future direction and build a professional l body that is the equal of the royal colleges in the medical field*" (Bates, 2012).

Two years later it closed its doors.

"*It was a tragic end to a promising project – social work's first professional college. The sterling work, and there was a lot of it, of the staff and social workers who contributed to the organisation and its faculties should not be forgotten. But nor should the uncomfortable realities at the root of the College's demise be ignored*". (McNicoll, 2016).

Further changes have involved another change of regulator, from the HCPC to Social Work England (SWE) 2019, seemingly down to the Government wanting an independent regulatory body specifically for social work. What has been most positive about this change was the acceptance of retaining the commitment to service user involvement in social work training, without it coming under question or threat. It was a worrying time when the HCPC brought into question whether the commitment to service user involvement should be retained. As a specific professional regulator, SWE consultations with service users and carers focussed on how to involve people rather than question if they should. That said, the outcome of the consultations which enthusiastically highlighted that 'Co-production should be integrated throughout social work education' (2019) has yet to be realised. One aim of my research is to contribute to Social Work England's aims, by providing an evidence base and model for integrating co-production in education.

A further route into social work education has been introduced making social work training in England unique in having six pathways to becoming a registered social worker. This contrasts with the rest of the UK where additional training is required for Step Up and Frontline graduates in Northern Ireland and Scotland and with Frontline graduates in Wales. Beyond the UK, two routes; undergraduate and postgraduate are generally available. The Social Work Degree Apprenticeships (SWDA) introduced in 2018, is far apart from the elite focus of fast-track programmes. Interestingly, seventy one percent of the first cohort of Frontline went to Russell group universities, compared to thirty percent of students on a group of postgraduate courses with high entry criteria, (Stevenson, 2018). Ultimately all

routes lead to registering with the same qualification although the move into leadership roles is purposefully quicker via fast-track courses.

The SWDA is a return to the origins of social work, employment-based learning, and a widening participation agenda. The key aim of this approach to 'promote diversity' and redress the under representation of social work staff to better reflect the community they serve (Stevenson, 2017.) I have found it most encouraging to think about how social work education could be much more inclusive of people with lived experiences who had not found it possible to enter training through traditional routes. Key to widening participation is the different funding model the SWDA provides which means that student loans or fees are not incurred. It is too early to say if these aims are being realised as the first cohort who could be evaluated don't graduate until 2021. From my early observations it relies on new and active approaches to meaningfully promote a diverse workforce, my concerns are that if it becomes a reward and appraisal strategy for internal employees it risks 'cloning the workforce' already in place (Casey, 2018).

I shall now introduce some of the key themes that underpin the social work context and are integral to conducting the research.

1.5 Key Themes.

A. Power.

The starting point for undertaking research founded on experiential knowledge is understanding that knowledge and power are inseparable. For Foucault, 'Knowledge is always an exercise of power and power always a function of knowledge'. The power to act in a certain way depends upon the predominant 'knowledge' of society and how society, 'discourse' was key to defining the reality of the social world, and ideas within a modern 'disciplinary' society, that exercises power through institutions such as schools, prisons, military. (Foucault, 1980).

By viewing power as something resulting from interactions between people, from institutional practices and through exercising different types of knowledge, Foucault's ideas are most relevant to Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR challenges systems of

surveillance and knowledge control established through 'traditional' research, by empowering communities to take control of research agendas they have agency. (Baum et al, 2006). This is demonstrated through the Mend the Gap approach as each project developed transformative outcomes determined by participants.

Smith (2010) has observed that concepts of power that can be oversimplistic or deterministic by focussing on simple binaries of oppression (e.g., race/gender) have been superseded by concepts that recognise that people have come to understand themselves within more dynamic and fluid identities. (p. 4). Intersectionality is a critical theory within this thesis that recognises the different ways in which peoples' lived experiences, from diverse backgrounds encounter the world (Crenshaw, 1989.) It endeavours to address forms of oppression by recognising the interplay with different prejudices, raising questions as to who is responsible for combatting oppression.

"Intersectionality operates as both the observance and analysis of power imbalances , and the tool by which those power imbalances could be eliminated altogether….the observance of power imbalances, as is so frequently true, is far less controversial than the tool that could eliminate them."

(Coaston, 2019).

Smith argues (ibid) that a range of intervention strategies that focus on possibilities of change are required to challenge the oppression experienced by service users and offers a useful framework for reframing power relationships based upon; 'Representations of power', 'modes of power', 'personal power',' positional power', 'relational power' and 'sites of power'. The interconnected relationship between these components highlights the complexities of power dynamics when intervening in people's lives. Most significantly Smith concludes that relational power is key to working collaboratively with those in situations of 'risk'.

" The legitimacy of practitioners' interventions will therefore depend on the extent, to which they establish credibility and trust. Social work practice needs to be based on the principles of partnership with service users and 'exchange', rather than control. "(Smith, 2008a, p. 56 cited in Smith 2010, p.6.).

A unique feature of the Mend the Gap approach is that power is consciously addressed from the outset. Mend the Gap participants have described how excluded they have felt from policies and practice which directly impacts on them. That where they have been invited to take part in something, the agenda has already been set. Those who feel particularly stigmatised and marginalised in their situations have for the first time, identified the gaps in their experiences of the support they have received. The gaps inform themes and structure the agenda led by them. A key point I demonstrate in this thesis is that changing power relations from the outset changes outcomes. My research demonstrates that the minimal evidence in change in practice from involvement that has been sustained for a long period, is largely due to power that has been maintained by academics. And the academic world is inherently protective and precious over the ownership of ideas. I contend through my research, that until social work students experience a different power, which comes from experiential knowledge, they won't develop the relational skills they need to bring to practice.

The ethical dimensions of power when engaging in research with marginalised individuals and groups is considered next. A review of literature evinced a common acceptance that ethical implications begin with power aspects in the research relationship (Marshall and Batten, 2004, Karnieli-Miller, 2009, Das, 2010, Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012, Mowatt, 2015, Burkman and Newman, 2021).

B. Ethics.

'Ethics is about matters of rights, responsibilities, harms and benefits.' (Banks, 2015, p1)

This statement encapsulates the priorities for my research. As a researcher I have held the responsibility to protect participants and uphold their rights. I have sought through implementing participatory methodology to empower people to share responsibilities for sharing ethical and moral responsibilities, for example maintaining confidentiality. The first principles for involving people in research is to understand levels of risks the research presents. My own experience of gaining (university) ethical approval to conduct this research was scrutinised, particularly in respect of involving unaccompanied young asylum seekers requiring interpreter support. It is clearly essential to understand how marginalised, collectively, and individually, research participants can feel, and to identify levels of support

they may require. However, it is as essential to engage those who are most marginalised in society to be involved and heard (SCIE, 2015), to prevent people from becoming more excluded (Tanner et al, 2017).The need to work with unaccompanied minors was identified by a support service in the North East Community 'Investing in people and Culture' (IPC, who requested to be identified in the research, a point to return to). The aim was to promote their voices, views, and experiences and crucially integration into a new society. The risks for young people feeling made to experience being excluded and unequal was that they could become more vulnerable to 'extremists' preying upon them. It is recognised that unaccompanied children and young people are highly vulnerable to exploitation and danger (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2017, Department of Education 2017). The Mend the Gap project with young people led to co-producing guidance for local authorities that changed young people's experiences of arriving in the UK. Participants identified from their own experiences of feeling 'interrogated' on arrival that making young people feel welcome and supported is a key first step in building trust.

My research demonstrates how involving people on equal terms, leads to participants experiences of the beneficial impact of involvement in research, education, and practice. In addition, the outcomes of research (identified in chapter four) demonstrate how the co-impact of involvement was achieved.

'*The concept of co-impact characterises the complex and dynamic process of social and economic change generated by participatory action research, as opposed to more conventional dominant research models which are based on a donor-recipient model occurring at the end of a project following take-up and use of findings*' (Banks, Herrington and Carter, 2018).

The ethical involvement of service users in research, education and practice involves managing a 'range of morally contentious and ambiguous situations' (Clifford and Burke, 2009 in Burke and Newman, 2021 in Mclaughlin et al, 2021, pp 56/57). As a further support to navigating the range of ethical issues I could encounter I joined both the University 'Community and Social justice Research group' (CSJRG) and the 'United Kingdom Participatory Research network (UKPRN). Both groups provided opportunities for lively discussion and debate around ethical issues within research. The structure of a UKPRN event incorporates a 'dilemmas café' developed by the Centre for Social Justice and

Community Action (CSJCA -Durham University 2015), whereby focus is placed on community based participatory research (CBPR). I found it both useful and stimulating to have the opportunity to engage in collaborative and critical dialogue throughout conducting my research. Fortunately, I did not encounter any problems, for example no one withdrew from the research, but I would have felt better prepared if this had happened.

Before moving on to reflect more fully on my role and experience as a researcher I shall briefly mention one other PhD studentship opportunity I undertook. In addition to active membership of the above-named groups, one most valuable opportunity I took up for a two-year period was tutoring on the 'Inside Out' course run by Durham University Criminology department (Durham University 2014). Through this fortuity I gained insight into learning alongside 'inside' (prison) students and 'outside' (criminology) students within an innovative approach to participatory education. In my role supporting 'instructors' who had all trained in America where Inside Out originated, I learned from people's experiences and views on a range of topics. For example, whether prison works, the causes of crime and criminalisation of drugs. I was able to extend my support and interest as a volunteer at the monthly 'Think Tank' meetings .This provided space for inside students and instructors to develop ideas for Inside Out and other participatory research projects. All activities were stopped with the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic. It is beyond the remit of my thesis to expand on the fantastic learning initiative that is provided to students behind prison walls. I would instead direct the reader to extensive research and writing from the founder Lori Pompa (1995) also Durham university instructors (King, O Brien and Measham, 2019).

What struck me most in my learning from this programme was the structural barriers within prison which maintained the distance between prisoners and prison staff. This may seem a naïve statement, but the obvious gaps were inherent in this distance. Ultimately, I was left with similar questions that have arisen from social work education. The value and principles for joint learning outside of the classroom within prisons presents many benefits. The outcomes are less clear. I suggest one reason for this is the unchanged distance between prison staff and prisoners. An aim of my research is to demonstrate the transferability of the Mend the Gap approach in contexts where barriers are greatest. Where concepts such as power, empathy, positive values, effective communication and mutual understanding are crucial to effective human service provision.

I shall now reflect further upon my research role.

C. Reflexivity.

It is perhaps axiomatic to assert that reflection is an ongoing active process throughout research. As a social worker, educator and counsellor, I have been a reflective practitioner since the first day of professional study when I was introduced to key thinkers such as Dewey(1910) whose seminal work 'How We Think' had a major influence on education and Schon (1983) whose 'Reflection in and on Action' provided an influential model for analysing the reflection process. As a student social worker, I was encouraged to maintain a reflective diary which remained a useful tool throughout my career. Refection throughout this thesis is multi-faceted:

"*Reflexivity is a continual process of engaging with and articulating the place of the researcher and the context of the research*". (Barrett et al, 2020, p.9).

To begin with reflecting upon my role as a researcher, I was keenly aware that as a lecturer, wage earner and registered social worker, however equally I intended the research process to be, I risked being seen as someone with expert power. Alongside my professional identify, my personal identity as a white woman growing up within Western culture required me to reflect at each stage of my research how my gender, age ,ethnicity, personal experiences and views impacted on the research process. Reflexivity informs positionality, requiring explicit self- awareness and constant review by the researcher about how their own views and positions impact on all stages of the research process (May and Perry, 2017). As my research developed, I acknowledged that I was getting in touch with some of my own lived experiences which the adoption of an intersectional feminist perspective , outlined in the previous chapter, cast light upon. As a young adult I had used mental health services. This was a very big part of me that I chose to keep private, yet it underpinned my professional role. Undertaking this research has been a personal journey that has led me to review my decision not to disclose my personal experiences. Becoming a reflexive researcher within an environment co developed to build trust and relationships, I have come to see my experience differently (explored in chapters three and four and discussed in chapter five).

Reflexivity involves a continual process of reciprocal interaction between researchers and researched with the researcher instrumental in this process. It involves the researcher challenging oneself 'to develop a kind of self-reflexivity that will enable us to look closely at our own practice in terms of how we contribute to dominance in spite of our liberatory intentions' (Lather, 1991 in McGuire in Reason and Bradbury 2001, p.65). By taking a triangulated approach to the methodology I ensured the research was explored from different perspectives.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA) (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2019) was applied to all data to ensure a high standard of rigour and transparency, essential to validating qualitative research. Evaluation of the Mend the Gap projects in line with PAR included democratically agreed processes, within Transformative Participatory Evaluation (T-PE) (Cousins and Whitmore, 1998). Reflection was built into each project throughout. (This was not a feature of focus groups as single events). Participants made notes of their own thoughts and feelings with co-researchers maintaining reflective logs. According to Marshal and Reason (2007), continual self-reflection and reflective dialogue are necessary qualitative indicators for participatory research. Reflective processes enabled contributions of deep and enriching feedback on the impact of the project at various stages. Participants shared critical reflections to deliver key messages of what had been learned from each other. This uncovered changed perspectives and, in some cases, changed values illustrating Freire's concept of 'conscientization' which is 'the process of developing a critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action' (Freire 1970). This involves individuals and communities exploring and acting on the root causes of oppression as they experience this.

I recorded an evaluation of each Mend the Gap project to convey from participants themselves, their experiences in their words (Appendix four). Riecken et al (2004) demand an "Ethics of Voice" in Participatory Research methodology to make the variety of contributions visible. Each film is under five minutes and I have found that they are more powerful than writing summary reports and extend traditional boundaries of data collection. The films were launched at a 'Mend the Gap' conference I organised in London (2019), supported by high profile keynote speakers (discussed in chapter four). Many Mend the Gap participants travelled from the Northeast and fully appreciated the significance and impact of their work. The challenge for participatory researchers is to demonstrate the level

of robustness and rigour that makes it acceptable as qualitative research within the academic community (Bergold and Thomas, 2012). The potential for criticisms that this approach risks for being unduly subjective are counteracted through demonstrating how the quality and rigour of this study is achieved (Chapter three).

A further comment here is to acknowledge the value of reflecting on my work throughout in regular discussion with my supervisors. Coming from different professional backgrounds – Roger Smith; social work rooted in probation and youth justice and Graham Towl; forensic psychology rooted in suicide prevention in prison- their varied and complimentary perspectives as established qualitative researchers and accomplished authors, really challenged me to try out new ideas.

To conclude this section, before outlining the structure of this thesis, I shall make a final reflection upon my role which outlines my development as a researcher.

Since registering in January 2016 as a part time PhD student (and being a single parent of two teenagers, working and living in a rural area) I was not able to fully immerse myself in the luxury of the full range of opportunities as a student. However, I did attend many seminars, conferences and summer schools which have greatly enhanced my knowledge and skills as a researcher. Although I still favour flip charts, post it notes and highlighter pens over data analysis software, I do plan to persevere with using this in the future. My journey as a researcher alongside my professional role has been stimulating and rewarding. During this period, I received my first invitation to co-edit an international publication exploring service user and carer involvement in human services contexts (McLaughlin et al, 2021). This presented an opportunity to co -write four chapters with some of the research participants. The co –impact of the additional value and benefits to research participants as co-authors of their own experiences is a significant outcome of this research. In addition, I have been able to apply my research interests to a publication that demonstrates the importance of my research topic.

1.6. Structure of thesis.

This thesis is divided into five chapters beginning with this introductory chapter outlining background information for this thesis. This has included a brief introduction to my personal and professional background, demonstrating my development as a practitioner to becoming a researcher. It set out the context within which the study is located, the focus of the research, key themes and aims illustrated by the main research question for exploration. Each subsequent chapter is introduced with a core message to make it abundantly clear to the reader what is being demonstrated that is significant and unique to this research.

Chapter two provides a discussion of the literature outlining the search strategy used. It goes on to establish key themes from the existing research base to define the path from the dominance of traditional research to research strategies based on experiential knowledge. Building on the academic and theoretical frameworks for the research context, language and terminology are addressed through a critical lens. Research gaps are identified around the impact of involvement underpinning the main research question. This justifies the potential for reconceptualising a more diversified knowledge base of the subject as it continues to develop in later chapters.

Chapter Three sets out the overall design of the study and the methodological framework on which it is based. This is a Participatory Paradigm supported by the theoretical framework integral to qualitative research design. The research methods used are examined ; namely Participatory Action Research (PAR) and focus groups. The 'Mend the Gap' approach is introduced as a strategy for implementing the research and innovative way of promoting the equal participation of service users and carers in social work education. The overall validity and reliability of the research is outlined incorporating the researcher/participant relationship and researcher reflexivity, and research ethics scrutinised to include key considerations of consent, confidentiality, and information sharing. Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) 'Reflexive TA' is introduced as a methodological process for data collection and analysis. This justifies the approach to exploring the research question generating 'evidence' from participants' voices and experiences.

Chapter Four presents a full analysis of the data sets and research findings. The cross verification between two different data sources demonstrates the wide range of ways that

people with lived experiences can be involved with students and social workers' education and practice. The findings present new evidence on learning together to co-produce knowledge as a two-way process enabling a depth of learning and critical reflection, building trust and relationships between people. They reveal that the standard for service user and carer involvement in social work education is in some cases partially met or unmet. Academics drive the agenda for involvement, yet it is not consistently applied on all social work courses. A solution for this problem is found through my research which proposes that people with lived experiences should drive the agenda for education and professional development. The outcomes of both data sets identify a clear evidence base for co-production. Outcomes from Mend the Gap projects identify changes to policy and practice as well as at a personal level. This contrasts with outcomes from focus groups which tend towards identifying benefits at an individual level, leaving questions unanswered regarding changes to practice.

Chapter Five discusses the research findings, justifying the strength and validity of the Mend the Gap approach and ways in which my research makes a key contribution to the field of social work. The potential transferability of my research findings to other professional and higher education contexts is also demonstrated. It outlines the key recommendations for social work, education, and research, reflecting on the design, limitations of the study and my experience as a reflexive researcher. The importance of creating learning spaces where everyone feels comfortable to share lived experiences (of using services or experiencing disadvantage or discrimination) is recognised. I deduce that unless practitioners, academics and students have opportunities to share such learning spaces alongside those contributing from their lived experiences of social work, the status quo that this thesis seeks to challenge will only be maintained. This point challenges my own experiences of not disclosing having used mental health services in my professional role. Overall, the conclusion identifies the extent to which the study achieved the aims set out and the significance of its contribution to new knowledge in this field.

Chapter Two.

Literature review.

2.1 Introduction

As outlined in chapter one, my research aims to explore the impact of service user and carer involvement in social work education. A fundamental proposition made in this study is that to date such involvement has been more focussed on values, principles and processes than outcomes. Thus, the literature review examines empirical research undertaken in this field.

Section one begins by outlining the research strategy used. It then goes on to establish key themes from the existing research base, exploring values and principles which define the path from the dominance of traditional research to research strategies based on experiential knowledge.

Section two builds on the academic and theoretical frameworks for the research context, critically appraising language and terminology which is essential to clarify at the outset of the study. Research gaps in relation to the impact of involvement are identified warranting the case for my research to be undertaken.

Together, these sections justify the potential for reconceptualising a more diversified knowledge base of the subject as it continues to develop in later chapters. This chapter (and subsequent ones) begins with a most pertinent quote and the central argument conveyed.

 "One has to respect the levels of understanding that those becoming educated have their own reality. To impose on them one's own understanding in the name of liberation is to accept authoritarian solutions as ways to freedom. But to assume the naivete of those becoming educated demands from educators a most necessary humility to assume their ability to criticise, thus overcoming our naivete as well". **(**Freire and Macedo, 1987, p.41)

Freire's seminal work 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' was published in 1968 in Portuguese (translated into eighteen languages). In it he presents a ground-breaking theory of education in the context of revolutionary struggle for rural peasants in South America. His life's work was dedicated to the study of the education of oppressed communities and has

had a profound impact on the lives of countless people and the field of education. The introductory quote from Freire and Mercedo establishes a critical pedagogy that is highly relevant to my research context. Freire and Macedo make it very clear in their statement that the task of the tutor is to establish a critical pedagogy that engages students with the community. As Ward asserts:

"The task of critical pedagogy is two-fold. First to transform the awareness and second to bring about a process of social transformation in the larger world. These two forums are related and ultimately the former can only be accomplished through an engagement with the latter. "(Ward, 2018, p.4).

A key aim of my research is to bring about change with people who feel most marginalised, stigmatised and powerless in society today in relation to the social work education context. .

The central argument in this chapter that I will be making is that most research and literature in the field of service user and carer involvement in social work education focusses on processes rather than outcomes. One fundamental problem with this is that the principles of involvement are promoted more than the actual difference that involvement makes in education and most significantly in practice. Hence the focus of my research question; *what difference does involvement make*? The shift away from traditional research approaches to methods which focus on first-hand experiential learning promotes new and diverse insights which challenge existing educational structures. My aim is to build on the current research base by presenting new evidence of the outcomes of involvement. It is hoped that this will strengthen new approaches to involvement which are more meaningful by measuring outcomes rather than processes.

Thus, the aim of this chapter is to present a review of published research in relation to the impact of service user and carer involvement in social work education. Key theories and ideas which underpin this thesis are identified from the literature, gaps in the current research context are clarified. I have adhered to guidance by Ramdhani et al:

"In research the literature is a foundation and support for a new insight that you contribute. The focus of a literature review is to summarise and synthesise the arguments and ideas of others without adding new contributions". (Ramdhani et al, 2014,p.48)

2.2. Section one: Inquiry and experiential research.

2.2.1 Search strategy and rationale

The purpose of the search was to identify empirical data relating to the impact of service user and carer involvement in social work education. This began with preparing the proposal to undertake the research which was a significant point to evaluate research gaps and justify the research aims. The search has continued to be updated each year to ensure that it is current and thorough.

The following databases were searched:

Applied Social Science Index and Abstracts, British Association of Social Workers, Community Care, Department of Education, Department of Health, Google Scholar, Health and Care Professions Council, International Federation of Social Work, Social Care Online, Social Care Institute for Excellence, General Social Care Council, Health and Care Professions Council, Social Work England, Shaping Our Lives, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, PowerUs, National Institute for Health Research.

Additional search strategies included key journals and a citation search of key articles and authors followed up from author's reference lists. I used search concepts to ensure that I did not miss something relevant to my key search topic. Boolean operators were also applied to enhance search results. Recommendations from others - supervisors, colleagues and peers -produced further relevant resources:

British Journal of Social Work, British Journal of Psychology, International Journal of Social Work, Journal of Social Work Practice, Social Work in Action, Social Work Education Journal Qualitative Social Work, International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Health and Well Being, Journal of Education Policy.

The focus was to use primary sources wherever possible. Where secondary sources were found, primary sources were followed up to check against possible errors. (Ramdhani, Ramdhani and Amin, 2014). Focus was placed on social work research and literature in the UK with some international literature included for the following reasons:

- Social work is an international profession, it is widely accepted that social workers need a good understanding of the global context in which they are

working. (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014, Noble et al, 2014, Nosowska, 2019, Allen, 2016, Ornellas, 2018).

- PowerUs is an international growing network currently supporting Universities in eighteen countries who have adopted 'gap-mending' practices. My research has been stimulated by my introduction to gap-mending and the PowerUs network.

- Paulo Freire's lifelong work challenging the oppression of people living in third world countries continues to make significant contributions to education and practice (Gadotti, 1994, Giroux, 2010, Rugut and Osman, 2013, Featherstone, 2020). My research is informed by the goals which Freire held to promote positive action for change and development.

Literature which was relevant to the research topic but not within the subject focus provided a contextual backdrop to some of the discussion points and is referenced accordingly.

2.2.2. Type of literature review and rationale

Three main types of literature review were considered:

Traditional/narrative – this is a rather general, mainly descriptive type of literature review which tends towards relying more on summarising and synthesising evidence on a topic, rather than focussing on a specific pre – defined question. In this sense, it has been criticised for not reducing bias (Silva et al, 2015, Paul et al, 2015), and for not having guidelines to follow (ibid,). Conversely, it is also viewed positively as being flexible, less resource intensive than other types of review and inclusive of a wider range of evidence (Mays et al, 2005, Cronin et al, 2008).It has been deemed as less structured and more flexible than other types of review (Mays et al, 2005) which may account for the development of tools for conducting narrative reviews (Wallace and Wray, 2011).

Systematic - this follows a much more formal and structured process informed by guidance which has been developed to ensure the process is transparent to the reader. Evidence is systematically collated which focusses on a specific clearly formulated question, going beyond revealing evidence demonstrating a rigour and thoroughness which can easily be replicated. In this sense it prioritises eliminating bias. Conversely, systematic reviews have

been criticised for being inflexible and resource intensive (Mays et al, 2005, Moher, 2013,). According to Maclure, reviewers become 'reluctant readers' (Maclure, 2005) when they legitimise not reading certain reports i.e., reviewers reduce via their reluctance, the volume of findings to be synthesized with the ironic consequence that;

'"*reviewers actively shape what is seen as the body of research in a field whilst simultaneously preserving the system in systematic review, that is methodologically accounting for their decisions to read or not read the reports*". (Sandelowski et al, 2008, p.4).

Scoping – this aims to map the literature on a topic or research area and identify knowledge gaps and clarify key concepts. Scoping review processes also require rigorous and transparent methods to ensure the results are trustworthy. As scoping reviews aim to provide an overview or map of the evidence this could risk bias in the evidence unless this is specifically assessed. Overall, I concur with the view that '*There is much greater scope for literature reviews which include a broader range of material than would usually be the case with traditional systematic reviews*. (Beresford and Glasby, 2005, p.274)

The literature review undertaken for this thesis was primarily a scoping review selected as the best fit for the required literature search.

2.2.3. Research values and principles: traditional vs. experiential.

An overview of these two different key research contexts now follows, to fully appreciate the journey which people with lived experiences have actively taken from being objectively/ traditionally researched to becoming in control/subjectively within research and as researchers. I have sought a focussed path through the literature to briefly define the origins of action research as a response to, and critical commentary upon, traditional research. Great explorers such as Kurt Lewin (1946) Jean Piaget 1932, Paulo Freire (1972), John Heron (1981), Donald Schon (1983), Peter Reason (1994) have clearly mapped this route .To explore the roots of action research fully, as Eikeland points out, involves going as far back as Aristotle's work on praxis and phronesis (Reason and Bradbury, 2000). Focus is placed on the development of participatory research away from the traditional foundations of research, towards an epistemology that is central to understanding knowledge and

human experience. Put concisely, the starting point for understanding different approaches to research is to appreciate that these are guided by philosophical assumptions based upon beliefs held about the world and how best to discover its true 'reality'. The overall decision the researcher makes involves deciding upon which approach should be used to study a topic (explored in the next chapter-three- on methodology). The main distinction between research philosophy and approaches are commonly illustrated by the beliefs held by those undertaking quantitative research and those undertaking a qualitative approach.

The quantitative researcher is typically framed as objective, testing theories based upon examining the relationship among variables. These variables, in turn, can be measured, typically on instruments, so that numbered data can be analysed using statistical procedures (Creswell, 2017). The qualitative researcher in contrast is subjective, seeking to understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data (Creswell, 2017). Quantitative research studies concentrate on a relatively small number of variables (factors which may impact on the outcome of the study), whereas qualitative research designs are based on multiple measures and observations (Trocheim, 2002b) allowing the researcher to collect a wide variety of data with no attempt to control variables as the researcher aims to take the world as they find it (Johnson 2008). Interestingly, Newman and Benz contest this distinct 'either/or 'split arguing:

'*Qualitative and quantitative approaches should not be viewed as rigid, distinct categories, opposites, or dichotomies. Instead, they represent different ends on a continuum* '(Newman and Benz, in Cresswell, 2017,p.32).

The concepts of objectivity and subjectivity are similarly contested in social sciences research. These concepts seem to be crudely polarised in scientific research discourse, suggesting that objective research is free from bias therefore suggesting that subjective research is not and therefore less reliable. Within social sciences research, the interconnectedness is critical. I shall briefly summarise this debate by drawing upon the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu (1972) and Karl Popper (1935) who have significantly influenced this field.

Bourdieu argued for a relational objectivity manifested in relational structures and the principles which constitute them. As he stated it:

"*A science of dialectical relations between objective structures .... and the subjective dispositions within which these structures are actualised and which tend to reproduce them.... It teaches us that we shall escape from the ritual either/or choice between objectivism and subjectivism in which the social sciences have so far allowed themselves to be trapped only… if we subordinate all operations of scientific practice theory to a theory of practice and of practical knowledge…and inseparably from this…to a theory of the limits of this mode of knowledge*". (Bourdieu, 1977 pp.3 - 4)

In seeking to transcend the dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity Bourdieu employed a theory of practice that captured the dynamic and change of social processes. He developed primary concepts of 'Habitus' and 'Field ' which occupied an individual space (habitus), within a social space (field), making the relationship he termed one of 'ontological complicity'. The premise of Bourdieu's theory was to show how social agents develop strategies, –innately at an unconscious level, -which adapt to the structure of the social worlds they inhabit.

Critics of Bourdieu argue that the incompatibility of the concept of habitus with his practical theory retreats into objectivism (King, 2000). That the habitus conception is uncritically questioning, therefore it perpetuates the status quo rather than generates action which has the potential to disrupt and interrogate the field. (Akrivou and Di San Giorgio, 2014). Further criticisms were made upon his interpretation of the relations between class and culture, which are beyond the scope of this summary to expand upon. (Gartman, 1991, Bennett 2011, Yang, 2014). Critics tend to agree that his focus on the intersubjective interactions between individuals provides a constructive link between objectivity and subjectivity. The influence of Bourdieu's work demonstrates the significant impact he has made to overcome the antinomy of these concepts in human sciences. According to Weininger, at the time of his death in January 2002, 'Pierre Bourdieu was perhaps the most prominent sociologist in world' (Weininger, 2009 p.1).

According to Popper 'objectivity can only be reached through the path of inter subjectivity', - clarifying his position thus:

"I am not a behaviourist, and my defence of objectivity has nothing to do with any denial of "introspective methods" in psychology. I do not deny the existence of subjective experiences, of mental states, of intelligences, and of minds; I even believe these to be of the utmost importance. But I think that our theories about these subjective experiences, or about those minds, should be as objective as other theories. And by an objective theory I mean a theory which can be tested; not one which merely appeals to our subjective intuitions" (Popper, 1974 in Doria, 2009, p.5)

Popper founded the 'falsification principle' which recognised that knowledge in the objective sense includes items which are false or items which are neither true nor false. This allows for the growth of knowledge in a revolutionary way as new theories replace rather than extend previous ones. Thus, if the relationship between evidence and theory is a falsification it should be abandoned in search of a better one. For Popper truth should be the main endeavour for scientists and the best way to stay motivated in pursuit of truth is to keep away from falsehood. Popper encouraged open discussion and was committed to the 'Open Society'. He based his scientific methodology on the following set of rules for scientists to follow:

(1) An acceptable new theory must always have greater empirical content than its predecessors.

(2) An acceptable new theory must at least be able to explain all of the past success of its predecessors.

(3) Always test a theory as severely as possible.

(4) An experimentally "refuted" theory must be rejected.

(5) An experimentally "refuted" and rejected theory must not be revived at a later stage.

(6) An inconsistent theory cannot be accepted. (Maxwell, 1972, pp.3-5).

Critics of Popper state that the rules he proposed risk limiting the growth of science, they are too severe and risk eliminating promising theories which need time to be developed (Lakatos, 1968 , Feyerabend, 1970 in Maxwell, 1972). Maxwell examines these rules in depth and makes a more serious assertion that Popper's methodological rules are no more effective to achieve the aims of science than any other set of rules (Maxwell, ibid, pp.1-5). Others criticise his falsification theory. Kuhn (1996) argues that observation is itself theory

laden in the sense that different observers may hold different beliefs which could lead to radically different observations of the same phenomena. Hacking (1982) argues that scientists regularly conduct experiments which have minimal or no connection with theories, that many aspects of science, including a wider variety of observations and experiments that cannot be interpreted as attempts to falsify or confirm a particular theory. Critics agree that Popper's contribution to scientific methods and philosophy of science are profoundly important. Without a doubt Popper's followers outweigh his critics with Bondi famously stating that "There is no more to science than its method, and there is no more to its method than Popper has said". (Bondi cited in Hull, 1999 P.15).

As debates on this topic have continued, Munroe and Hardie (2019) have sought to put them to bed in social work by arguing for an alternative focus on the individual attributes associated with objectivity and subjectivity. In their view, the terms have become so unclear they should be avoided. Instead, they propose that desirable attributes should be reinforced and undesirable ones circumvented:

"*When the attributes of objectivity and subjectivity are examined in detail, it becomes apparent that they vary in how desirable and how feasible they are. A more precise language makes it easier to see the contributions of values, bias and power in social work policy and practice and reduce the risks of people over-claiming the reliability and neutrality of their assertions*" (Munroe and Hardie, 2019, p.411).

These authors highlight the complexities of decision making in contexts where empirical research is not in itself enough to base decisions on. They argue that values which pervade interventions may appear objective but are in fact underpinned by implicit values. That following rules is not straightforward in the complexity of service user's lives where judgement is required to decide which rules to apply. Conflict can arise between practitioners and service user's values, political views and preferences leading to judgements as to which views prevail. This could mean that in some situations the social worker uses their authority to decide and in others the service user's views are prioritised. They conclude that:

"*Instead of talking about objectivity and subjectivity, we should be more precise and state which of their attributes we are referring to...all of us need to be more cautious and critical in our use of knowledge*" (Munroe and Hardie, ibid p.425).

A summary does not seem adequate in the context of exploring such complex and influential ideas as Bourdieu and Popper as the wealth of research publications based on their work suggests. I find Munroe and Hardie's perspectives helpful to thinking about how to focus on the attributes of each in social work. I feel they connect with Freire's view that 'objectivity and subjectivity are in a constant dialectical relationship. Neither can exist without the other, nor can they be dichotomised.' (Freire 1970, p.32)

These studies are pertinent to understanding a central theme of the main tenets of research philosophy – ontology and epistemology which I define next.

2.2.4. Ontology and Epistemology.

Blakie (2000) explains the difference between the two concepts quite simply:

Ontology is concerned with the 'science or study of being' and the central question of whether social entities should be perceived as 'objective' or 'subjective' i.e., the general basis of reality. As the branch of philosophy concerned with existence and reality, the ontological question would be posed as 'what is the nature of existence?' (Blakie, 2000, p.8)

Epistemology in opposition to ontology is concerned with the study of knowledge, enabling us to think about the way that we think and evaluate the world around us i.e., the general basis of reality including different methods for gaining knowledge. Whereas the basis of philosophy concerned with how we acquire knowledge, the epistemological question would be posed as 'what do you want to know and how do you know it?' (Blakie, ibid). Both components provide contrasting foundations for approaching the research question and methods.

Researchers concerned with reality in terms of establishing the facts would adopt an ontological approach with a positivist world view which sees the researcher and 'subject' as separate. To illustrate this, I found the idealised diagrams that have become known as 'snowpersons' drawn by Jon Heron (1981) most helpful to illustrate the power differences in the traditional research model vs. experiential model. In very simple stick drawing style, he

depicts the traditional model with the researcher outside and separate from the participant's experience. Heron explains this model is for 'unilateral control by the researcher of the research enterprise and subject's contribution to it'. (Heron, ibid p.2) Heron explains that their roles are separate and non-reciprocal. The researcher gives instructions to the participant in accordance with a hypothesis and research design on which the participant has not been consulted or informed. In this sense, their relationship is irrelevant to the research.

 'The researcher's commitment to the knowledge is more important than getting to know the subject'. (Heron, ibid.p.2)

Notably, research language has changed since Heron was using the traditional term of research 'subject' .This has been replaced by the term 'participant' to emphasise respectful active involvement of volunteers in research. Heron depicts the 'full blown experiential model' as interconnected, explaining that in this model each person involved is both researcher and participant. Both are equally involved from the outset and at all stages of the research process, through their own experience and action simultaneously through the experience and action of the other (Heron, ibid p.3). I like Heron's articulation:

'*Intrapsychically and interpersonally there is full reciprocity: the exchange of ideas, the mutual experiential encounter, the two-way corrective interaction between ideas and experience both within each person and between the two persons - it is all there*.' (Heron, ibid p.3)

Peter Reason has incorporated Heron's work with his own (Reason, 1994) asserting that the conflict with the principles of involvement based on experiential learning and a post positive paradigm is that 'the common epistemology of the Western Mind remains crudely positivist'. Reason's work into human inquiry over the past 40 years has contributed significantly to the growing field of action research from his perspective that:

 '*We can only understand our world if we are part of it; as soon as we attempt to stand outside, we divide and separate*'. (Reason,1994 p. 10).

This statement can be applied to a wide range of contexts, beyond the research relationship. In so doing, it is noticeable how easily the helper can assume a traditional

authoritarian role with the person being helped becoming dependant (which is later explored in the context of the social worker and service user relationship.) Reason's analysis of this problem was to see the pursuit of human inquiry less as one for truth and more as one for healing. 'To heal means to make one whole' (Reason, ibid.p.10). Reason and Heron have co-authored many research articles and maintained this focus on the human capacity for self-healing and enhanced wellness using co-operative and experiential inquiry methods. (Reason and Heron, 2009). One of the key guiding texts throughout my own research is the 'Handbook of Participatory Research' by Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (2001) which brings together a group of international researchers to share their common interests and differences; Andrea Cornwall, Jon Heron, John Rowan, Bill Tolbert, Budd Hall, Orlando Fals Border to name but a few of the inspirational contributors. One of the key tasks for the researcher producing a literature review is to critique the literature highlighting conflicting positions between authors/researchers. I find I am naturally aligned to the different perspectives shared amongst action researchers which Reason explains the meaning of the title to include a 'family' of action research approaches;

'we see this as a family…which sometimes argues and falls out, may at times ignore some of its members, has certain members who wish to dominate, yet a family which sees itself as different from other forms of , and is certainly willing to pull together in the face of criticism or hostility from supposedly 'objective' ways of doing research. Such a family needs spaces for conversation, where all members can sit alongside each other to compare perspectives'. (Reason, ibid, preface)

Thus, I have not look for contradictions and critique within a family of researchers with such wide- ranging shared perspectives. Instead, I draw on a common connection between theoretical positions based upon valuing collaborative relationships and wide ways of knowing. Action researchers do not follow one course of action but seek to explore creatively a variety of action research practices. My own research presents a model for participatory action research as a new addition to the family. The main tensions I have found in the literature are between the opposing theoretical and methodological positions of experiential knowledge, versus positivist traditional research and practice. Traditional research that maintains objectivity and distance from the research subject versus

emancipatory research driven by people who are the subject of research. As Beresford points out; feminist critique, rejects the concept of 'objectivity' and 'scientific' epistemology' as a means of maintaining dominance and power by the researcher in the relationship (Harding 1993 in Beresford 2005). Emancipatory service user-controlled research approaches reject positivist assumptions of 'objectivity':

'Their concern is with making change not only the production of knowledge which is seen as insufficient justification for research. This is reflected in commitments to:

Change more equal social relations of research production

The empowerment of service users

The making of broader social and political change'.

(Beresford, 2005, p.7)

As introduced in Chapter one, power is a key theme in the literature and my own research. To return to Freire who explored empowerment within varied key concepts. Freire sought to challenge the traditional educator/learner relationship through dialogue. In a dialogic model, teachers and students form a partnership and become jointly responsible for learning. Within this framework, the educator continually rearticulates her reflections based on students who are continually challenged by problems posed by them, thus becoming co-investigator rather than passive listener (Gadotti and Torres, 2009). Freire contrasts his dialogical approach with the 'banking concept of education' in which:

"Knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those they consider to know nothing". (Freire, 1972, p.52)

This concept can be applied to the way in which people have experienced research being 'done to/ not with' them. In a similar way that people have experienced decisions for services made 'about /not with' them. The key difference with values and principles of research and practice that validates experiential knowledge is a fundamental challenge to the professional as expert.

2.2.5 Experiential knowledge and Experiential Learning.

Throughout the literature search I have found that key terms of; experiential knowledge and experiential learning are presented interchangeably which conveys a simple message to me. That is, clearly there is a relationship between these concepts, but there are also differences. The concept of 'experiential learning' seems to have a longer history which the vast number of academic sources on the subject denotes. (Kolb 1984, Lewin 1946, Piaget]1995, Senge 1990, Dewey 1910, Schon 1983).The concept of 'experiential knowledge' in research and education is generally acknowledged as a 'more recent' concept with academic research sources expanding to denote the growing interest in this subject. (Rogers 1951, Heron, 1993, Borkman and Schubert 1994, Beresford and Carr, 2012). Both concepts are considered in order to appreciate the relationship, distinctions and development of service user involvement and participatory action research. This is central to the methodology for my research explored in the next chapter.

Experiential learning began with early investigation into exploring experience, interaction and reflection in education by John Dewey. In his book, 'How We Think' (1933) he introduced the concept of 'reflective conversation with the situation' as a way of looking at what practitioners do as an epistemology of practice. Dewey placed emphasis on reflective thinking identifying five phases or aspects of reflective thought, briefly summarised as follows:

1. Suggestion; according to Dewey, the natural state of mind is to respond to a situation by 'acting overtly' (ibid, p.7). Where a situation presents that causes uncertainty it 'inhibits direct action' (ibid, p.8) leading to re – examination of the issue and consideration of different courses of action.

2. Observation; Dewey asserted that what is first held as an 'emotional quality 'in the initial moments becomes intellectualised as a 'true problem' (ibid, pp.108-109). This requires taking stock of the situation and gathering all data based on current and previous observations, including those from others, to get a full picture. (ibid, pp.102-104).

3. Hypothesising; Dewey stated that ideas which emerge from the observational stage present possible answers to the problem as 'a definite supposition' (ibid, pp.109-110). It may be an extension or the first idea or something completely different.

4. Reasoning; all previous phases are thought through to assess potential implications of the hypothesis taking into account new ideas and facts. The link between the hypothesis and new facts leads to modification of previous thinking and development until a more feasible solution is found (ibid, p.111-112).

5. Testing; at this point reasoning that has taken place thus far needs to be verified through testing the hypothesis through action. Dewey identified two modes of action applicable at this final stage. 'Overt action' and 'imagined action' which depending on the nature of the problem and the solution could lead to action being carried out or left to the act of imagination (ibid. p.113-114).

It is important to note that Dewey saw the 'sequence of the five phases is not fixed'; as 'indispensable traits of reflective thinking' they are not linear (ibid, pp. 115-116). So, the final stage can lead to further observations, as the result of any stage can turn someone back to an earlier phase.

Rogers observes.

"*In this sense the process is cyclical; reflection comes full circle, the testing becomes the next experience and experiment and experience become, in fact, synonymous*" (2002, p.856).

It is beyond the scope of this literature review to examine Dewey's work in greater depth. However, I feel it is important to identify the roots of reflection that began with Dewey and continue to impact education and practice today. As introduced in the previous chapter, reflection is integral to professional practice and reflexivity is crucial to qualitative research. Rogers (ibid) warns that the concept of reflection is widely referred to without clear examination of its meaning and application:

"*An inherent risk in an imprecise picture of reflection is that, in an age where measurable, observable learning takes priority, it is easily dismissed precisely because no one knows what to look for……Dewey reminds us that reflection is a complex, rigorous, intellectual and emotional enterprise that takes time to do well….he provides us with a touchstone, a taproot, from which the conversation can flow and to which it can return when it gets lost or muddled*". (Ibid, p.3)

Kinsella shares the concern:

"*Despite its popularity and widespread adoption, a problem frequently raised in the literature concerns the lack of conceptual clarity surrounding the term reflective practice*", arguing that "*the theory of reflective practice is concerned with deep epistemological questions of significance to conceptions of knowledge in health and social care professions*".(2010, p.1)

Hebert cautions against:

"*An uncritical adoption of reflective models, stressing that in doing so, and the very spirit of reflective practice can be undermined*". (2015, p.1)

As a key theme within my research, it is essential to clearly define the meaning, language and theoretical basis of reflection. This would be incomplete without reference to two other ley learning theorists who have developed Dewey's work: Donald Schon (1983) and David Kolb (1984). Schon followed theories of Dewey arguing that:

'*Reflection is susceptible to the kind of rigor that is both like and unlike the rigor of scholarly research and controlled experiment*' (Schon, 1983, pg. ix).

Schon defined reflective practice as the practice where professionals become aware of their implicit knowledge base and learn from their experience. He defined key concepts of 'reflection in action' to reflect behaviour as it happens, and 'reflection on action' to review, analyse and evaluate a situation after the event. (Conversely one criticism of Schon's approach was based on the absence of reflection before action (Greenwood, 1993)). Schon introduced a further term of 'knowing in action' to describe tacit knowledge. In Schon's view, 'competent practitioners usually know more than they can say' (Schon 1983, p.8). Schon responded to inherent limitations in the 'technical rationality model' that contributed to the development of science and reasoning. He argued that a techno rational approach emphasised rigid linear solutions to problems, based solely on the application of scientific theory. (Schön 1983, 30, 37),

"*Standard textbook methodologies cannot be applied in cases where practice falls outside of standard technical problem solving, as it would evoke confusion and contradiction within practitioners* ."(Schön 1983, 40).

Schon's focus was on practitioners adopting a new thought process to avoid falling into increasingly spontaneous and automatic responses, which creates the danger of operating with a 'parochial narrowness of vision' (Schön 1983, 54, 60). Schon's work has not been without its critics, who refute Schon's propositions. For example, Finlay (2008) finds that reflective practice is 'too difficult 'and the reason why people fall into 'bland, mechanical, unthinking ways', Usher et al (1997) find Schon's methodology 'unreflexive' and Moon (1999) finds Schon's central concept 'unachievable'. There are many more similar criticisms summarised in Finlay's paper 'Reflecting on reflective practice' (2008). Von Manen's view (1990) that to achieve self -reflection one needs to step outside of the situation and reflect retrospectively I suggest is one most students would align with. I recall from teaching Schon's ideas to social work students that generally reflection on action felt more of a natural way to reflect i.e., following an intervention and that reflection in action was a hard concept for students to grasp.

Argrys' and Schon's ideas on 'Action science' (1974) focus on the way in which practitioners construe their behaviour. Their implicit cognitive models and their actual behaviour was further developed as 'Action inquiry' by Bill Torbert (1981, 1991). Torbert built on action science by adding a focus on outcomes to address the question of how to transform communities and organisations into collaborative self - reflective communities of inquiry. He based his vision of action inquiry on 'four territories of human experience':

- 'Knowledge of the system's own purposes' that is based on intuition in order to identify worthy goals and respond to new goals becoming more urgent,
- 'Knowledge of its strategy' that is based upon cognitive knowledge of theories underpinning choices,
- 'Knowledge of the behavioural choices' that is based upon practical knowledge and self -awareness,
- 'Knowledge of the outside world' that is based upon empirical knowledge of the consequences of behaviour, thus:

"*It is this attention what sees, embraces and corrects incongruities among missions, strategy, operations and outcomes. It is the sources of true sanity of natural awareness of the whole*" (Torbert, 1991, p.219).

Through mutual inquiry, 'experiential knowledge' is valued with citizens in the community held to be equally capable of reflection. The significance of Torbert's focus on outcomes for communities resonates strongly with my own research interests to develop outcomes beyond processes.

Reason (1994) explains how he has internalised the process of action inquiry as a 'discipline relevant to those most deeply committed to participatory approaches to inquiry' (p.50). This has informed my own self- reflection with exploring participatory action research in the chapter on methodology (three). David Kolb is third on the earlier identified list of key learning theorists. I hasten to add that the order is based on dates of seminal work rather than priority status. The literature reflects equal weighting to the influence of all three founders of distinct and complimentary reflective learning theories. (Ducket, 2002, Kayes, 2002, Dennison, 2010).

Kolb defined Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) as:

"*A holistic theory that defines learning as the major process of human adaptation involving the whole person*" (Kolb and Kolb, 2002, p.3).

ELT is based upon the work of prominent thinkers whose work placed experience at the centre of learning. For example, William James (1907), John Dewey (1910), Leve Vygotsky (1934), Kurt Lewin (1946) Jean Piaget (1932), Carl Jung (1951), Carl Rogers (1951) and Paulo Freire (1970).

Kolb drew inspiration from experiential learning theory to produce a model for conceptualising learning from new experiences. He introduced a four-stage cycle of learning-

Concrete experience (CE) – feeling through practical experience,

Reflective Observation (RO) – actively observing experience and outcomes, a

Abstract Conceptualisation (AO) - concluding and thinking about the experience and

Active Experimentation (AE) – planning on how to test something and finally doing it.

Kolb also identified four separate learning styles which recognise that students have diverse awareness and approaches as the starting point:

- Divergers (who are deemed to be imaginative by nature, viewing situations from a variety of perspectives, relying heavily upon free thinking and having the ability to create theoretical models),
- Convergers (who rely heavily on hypothetical/deductive reasoning), -
- Accommodators (who carry out plans and experiments and adapt to immediate circumstances)
- Assimilators (who prefer watching and thinking, well suited to lecture style learning).

For Kolb:

"*Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience*" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38).

This is the basis upon which Graham Gibbs introduced his 'learning by doing' model (1988). It would be incomplete to omit reference to Gibb's ideas which built upon Kolb's work by introducing a model of reflection that provides a structure to learn from experience. This model incorporates the core principles from Kolb, breaking it down further to encourage reflection on thoughts and feelings. It has six clearly defined sections:

1. Factual (a factual account of what happened),
2. Feelings (identifying feelings at the time of the event)
3. Evaluation (consideration of areas for development, practitioner and student learning)
4. Analysis, (making sense of the experience in relation to research and literature)
5. Conclusion (drawing ideas together based on wider research)
6. Action plan (drawing up a step-by-step plan for the new learning experience).

Together Gibbs and Kolb have had a huge impact on education and reflective practice. Notwithstanding other key contributors to this field e.g., Rolfe (2002) and Johns 2002, according to Finlay there is a:

'Proliferation of different versions and models to operationalise reflective practice' (Finlay, 2008, p.7).

Finlay criticised Gibbs' model, – amongst other criticisms noted earlier, – for not extending beyond practice to explore values which could lead to change and be more committed to quality and respect for difference. (Finlay ibid p.8). Kolb's learning styles inventory was criticised for having psychometric properties which Kolb developed in response (Kaye 2002). Critics of experiential learning theory have largely focussed on theoretical limitations. The emphasis on individual experience was criticised for being at the expense of psychodynamic, social and institutional aspects of learning (Holman et al, 1997, Reynolds, 1999 and Vince, 1988 in Kaye, 2002).Kaye has presented and informative and detailed account of 'experiential learning and its critics' (2002) concluding,

*'Alternatives (*to ELT*) include the introduction of critical theory, social learning theory, psychodynamics and phenomenology, as well as all-out institutional boycotts of the theory itself'.* (Kaye, 2002, p.14)

Kaye's lengthy 'critique of the critics', concludes in favour of experiential learning with a suggested 'refocussing of the agenda between personal and social knowledge'. This also echoes Dewey's agenda for learning reform, a better understanding of the role of language in learning. (Kaye, ibid, p.27).

In summary, I have sought to define and distinguish key reflective models which have had a significant impact on education, practice and research. All of these models have been fundamental to my practice as a social worker and practitioner. They have underpinned the way in which I have made reflection such an integral part of my own research although I have excluded the use of specific learning style models within this. I consider experiential learning cannot be fully defined without reference to key approaches. According to Fielding 'an understanding of learning styles is a necessary component in the groundwork of an emancipatory pedagogy' (Fielding, 1994, p. 394). To me this is the foundation of developing critical reflection that practitioners are encouraged to adopt. As Fook guides, to give recognition to the whole person, i.e., the physical, social, emotional, and cultural being, and how all these aspects are reflected in daily practice (Fook, 2004, 2009).

Further consideration is made next of the value of experiential knowledge which is one of the strongest messages I wish to convey in this thesis.

2.2.6. The Value of Experiential knowledge.

The concept of 'experiential knowledge' has been defined as:

"*Truth learned from personal experience with a phenomenon rather than truth acquired by discursive reasoning, observation, or reflection on information provided by others*". (Borkman, 1976, p.445).

Borkman's early paper on this subject placed focus on experiential knowledge as 'a new concept for the analysis of self – help groups' which were growing in number and, according to Borkman, 'triggered a strong reaction among some human service professionals, especially psychotherapists and social workers' (ibid). That is, they felt challenged in their professional roles. Borkman was writing at a time when emancipatory approaches that originated with the American black civil rights movement were also growing in number and variety. These included the women's rights movement, gay, bisexual, lesbian transgender movement, the mental health 'survivor' movement and the disabled peoples' movement. All these movements and development of service user led organisations represent people's determination to have their identity accepted and their voices heard. People's experiences in such collective contexts have led to significant legislation and policy changes, in the UK today. For example, the Equality Act 2010 which is the widest anti -discriminatory legislation in the UK (Gov.uk, 2010) evolved from earlier single pieces of legislation that came from people's collective experiences of discrimination. I shall return to a more specific example of this in the context of the disability movement.

Perhaps one of the challenging contexts for service user groups and movements to influence has been the field of academic research. The research base for knowledge in health and social care being, I argue, is one of the most fertile contexts in which people's experiences can inform research knowledge. Yet, traditional positivist research which is based on knowledge gained from observable experience has dominated social research as it has others. Service users and their organisations have questioned the professional as expert who is independent from the study, interested only in the facts excluding human interests. The possibility of 'neutrality' and 'distance' in research which may have once been

presented as 'merits' may be viewed as 'deficiencies' in the research process (Beresford, 2003).

By way of illustrating the growing interest in service user led research, I shall briefly draw upon research undertaken by the 'Toronto group' (Hanley, 2005) which brought together some high-profile activists, (who originally met at a conference in Toronto) to question the way in which mainstream research undermined meaningful involvement. A series of seminars was conducted to address key issues facing service users in research, developing ideas of what quality research should look like. Quality research was found to be a contested concept as it could reflect academics own priorities rather than people's direct experiences. Four themes were considered, first in respect of how service users could be involved in mainstream research, second relating to involvement in peer reviews. The third theme focussed on the experiences of black and minority ethnic communities. Finally, emancipatory research was explored and agreed : 'For it to be valued by users it needs to lead to change, not act as an end in itself ' (Hanley, 2005, p.52). A key aim of the Toronto group's seminars was to 'stimulate discussion and debate about research as empowerment '(ibid) which is an important concept for my own research.

Jijian Voronka's 2016, paper on 'The politics of lived experience' strongly argues that the value of how lived experiences of people with mental illness is key to promoting social justice and change. Themes that emerge from this paper of 'identity' and 'power' are integral to examining the research and literature on experiential knowledge and are strong themes within evaluation of my own research.

Peter Beresford, 2019, points out that:

"We have argued that by devaluing experiential knowledge we lose a key knowledge source. We also highlight that this means crucially that if an individual has direct, lived experience of problems like disability or poverty, or of oppression and discrimination, of cuts and 'austerity', of racism and sexism, when such traditional positivist research values are accepted, what they say – their accounts and narratives - will be seen as having less legitimacy and authority. Because people experiencing hardship will be 'close to the problem', they cannot claim they are 'neutral', 'objective' or 'distant' from it. So, in addition to any discrimination and oppression they already experience, they are likely to be a less

reliable and a less valid source of knowledge. By this logic, if someone has experience of discrimination and oppression, they can expect routinely to face further discrimination and be further marginalised by being having less credibility and being a less reliable source of knowledge" (Beresford,2019, p.1).

This message relates to Freire's concept of 'conscientization' i.e., critical consciousness, defined as having the 'ability to intervene in order to change it' (Freire, 1972). Critical consciousness focusses on achieving an in depth understanding of the world in a similar way that experiential knowledge focuses on achieving understanding of people's experiences in the world. Both involve acting against the oppressive elements in one's life which come from such depth of understanding. Freire's concern with the state of consciousness of the oppressed class, is one of seeing their vocation to struggle and realise their humanity which the oppressor denies them. In doing, they do so for everyone. This point at which the oppressed class liberates the oppressors from their role Freire explains,' resolves a contradiction in which neither are fully human'. I view as a point for discussion this connection with how people have felt as oppressed by their experiences as service users that they have felt less than human. In speaking about this, they have been able to surface feeling human again and reveal the humanity of the oppressor, who in a professional role has exploited the service user's vulnerability. For example, policies which have been introduced to close long - stay institutions and rehabilitate people in the community, demonstrate the positive steps taken to release people from 'homes' which have felt like prison, where people have suffered abuse and degradation. (See for example, Winterbourne, Samuel, 2012). This has given a positive message to staff supporting them that such treatment is unacceptable. The aim of Valuing People, (DofH,2001), was for people to live as equal citizens fully participating in society. Where people's rights are abused by being denied this, the struggle for all to realise their humanity continues.

Several authors remind us that meaningful service user and carer involvement in professional education ensures that we never lose sight of the fact that service users and carers are human beings' (Advocacy in Action, 2006; Branfield, 2009; Morrow et al, 2012 in Beresford, et al 2016). It is interesting to consider further how much more connected those in professional roles can be at a human level, when people come together through common aims.

"In social work education, more than any other area, there are common aims between the individuals providing services, the teaching staff, the service users and the students. We should use these common aims to develop the courses together" (service user cited in Branfield, 2007, p.1)

I would extend this point to other professions where there are similar common aims, for example medicine, criminology. The significance of experiential knowledge which can help to achieve this is explored in later discussion. Melanie Fricker, 2010, has initiated debate around the concept of 'epistemic injustice' which consists of a wrong being done to someone 'specifically in their capacity as knower'. Her work on this subject framed in a context of 'the power and ethics of knowing' has led to growing recognition of how epistemic justice can be achieved when people who are most marginalised and discriminated against contribute to a general knowledge base. Service user led organisations such as Shaping Our Lives, have been promoting epistemic justice over the past fifteen years, by conducting a wide range of research with people from diverse backgrounds. (Shaping Our Lives, 2003)

A further key aim of my research is to promote epistemic justice with service user participants. As it is more widely acceptable now to promote collaborative research and practice it is hard to imagine the barriers people have had and continue to overcome. The 'struggles' of social movements as the language so often reflects, signify the ways in which people come together collectively to fight for their rights and voices to be heard. The movements are examples where people have come together to promote common ideology and anti-oppression by actively seeking to bring about reform or be revolutionary with aims to bring about change in society. Freire was a revolutionary whose goal was to bring about change in the structure of society, reaffirming in his last writings the role of ordinary people as 'makers of history' and seekers of the dream of authentic democracy (Freire, 1994). People who have been active participants in social movements, have been makers of history in their campaigns for equal rights. They have challenged traditional theories and constructs to promote new theories and knowledge rooted in their experiences, which has helped to transform the way in which experiential knowledge is valued in research. (Oakley, 1998, Wilson and Beresford, 2000, Beresford, 2018, Tillman, 2002, Smith et al, 2005).

A key context has been the field of disability research which has strongly argued for the need for more emancipatory research strategies where disabled people are involved as consultants and partners not just research subjects (Kitchin, 2010, Oliver, 2010, 2013, Goodley et al, 2010, Walmsley 2010, Beresford and Carr, 2011) .This is a direct extension of the work of key activists in the disability movement. Mike Oliver, along with Vic Finkelstein and Colin Barnes were disabled activists who introduced radical ideas which developed a grassroots movement campaigning for independent living and equal rights. Vic Finkelstein co-founded the Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation (UPIAS) in 1972 along with Paul Hunt who had campaigned against institutional discrimination having spent most of his life in residential homes (Finkelstein, 2001). Mike Oliver named the concept of 'the social model of disability' (Oliver, 1981) which challenged the individual/medical model of disability that he saw was key to understanding disabled people' oppression. Finkelstein saw that what was 'paramount was focus on the need to change the disabling society rather than make people fit for society'. Colin Barnes actively supported these ideas by conducting research with the British Council of Disabled people which revealed the extent of discrimination faced by disabled people (Barnes, 1991). A key question these activists grappled with, was:

 "*How do you change an oppressive system rather than spend fruitless time appealing to the prejudiced to cease their discrimination*?"(Finkelstein, 2001, p.3).

Despite being seen as extremists back in the 1970's, it was this radical approach to challenging traditional professional academic and scientific thinking about 'people's personal tragedy' that ultimately led to the introduction of disability discrimination legislation (Gov.uk,1995).

'Nothing about us without us' is a motto most associated with the disability rights movement, encapsulates the core message from disabled people.

This powerful phrase:

 "Derives *from its location of the source of many types of (disability) oppression and its simultaneous opposition to such oppression in the context of control and voice*" (Charlton, 1998, p.3).

It is a message that I feel encapsulates the core message for research too. The way in which experiential knowledge has been validated to inform social work education is unique to the UK. Internationally this has attracted much interest and stimulated similar developments. The context for social work education and practice which has been informed by experiential knowledge is explored in the next section.

2.3 Section Two: Involving 'service users' and 'carers' in social work education.

2.3.1 Language, terminology, and meaningful involvement.

The term 'service user' has had a tradition of 40 years in the service system in Britain and is used by groups '*to secure their rights and needs in relation to their use of health, social care, welfare policies and services'* (Beresford,2005 p.469).

The author, Peter Beresford has written extensively about service user involvement in practice and education and is co-chair of a national service user lead organisation 'Shaping Our Lives' who provide a clear and comprehensive definition of the term service user:

- *It means that we are in an unequal and oppressive relationship with the state and society*
- *It is about entitlement to receive welfare services. This includes the past when we might have received them and the present.*
- *It may mean having to use services for a long time which separate us from other people, and which make people think we are inferior and that there is something wrong with us.*
- *Being a service user means that we can identify and recognise that we share a lot of experiences with a wide range of other people who use services. This might include, for example, young people with experience of being looked after in care, people with learning difficulties, mental health service users, older people, people with physical or sensory impairments, people using palliative care services and people with drug and alcohol problems.*

 (Shaping Our Lives, 2015:1)

There are many other terms of reference which have been used in British social work as identified by Hugh McLaughlin (2009), these include 'client', 'customer', 'consumer' and 'expert by experience'.

*'These different labels are very important as they all conjure up differing identities identifying different relationships and differing power dynamics' (*2009, p.1102*).*

McLaughlin has recently updated this chapter in a recent publication (McLaughlin et al, 2021, ch.3) and explains that attention to language is more important than ever 'in relation to the context in which it is used and the underpinning nature of wider society ….key words are integral to social work's discourse'. His chapter focuses on the context of 'neo liberal hegemony' which recognises the importance of recognising how the same terms are used, unquestioningly. He comes to the same conclusion ten years on, that that the preference should be to ask people to how they wish to be referred (2009, 2021) with the added suggestion for the 'professional', 'educator' or 'social researcher' to be' 'open to a discussion about the negative and positive implications of any particular term'. (2021, p.40).

There is no doubt from the literature that the term 'service user' is contested. Especially so in the mental health field. Wallcraft explains that the term is often reduced to 'user' to describe those who use mental health services, which is generally strongly disliked as it suggests people are 'drug users' or someone who 'uses' people. She feels the term conveys service reform and improvement rather than radical challenge and makes the point that mental health service users often do not choose to use services. (Wallcraft, 2003). Further observing that when undertaking research twenty years earlier about the 'mental health service user movement' she noted then that the terms people used to describe themselves varied to reflect the personal experiences of those using the words:

'*For example, the choice to describe oneself as a 'survivor' often denotes a negative experience of the psychiatric system, whereby recovery is perceived to be despite, rather than due to, the intervention of mental health services'* (Wallcraft, 2003, p.5.)

Notably this point about survival despite support that should have helped not hindered recovery is picked up by McLaughlin, who suggests that the positive and negative implications should be open to discussion. To me, this emphasises the meanings behind the labels more than the terms themselves. Where preferable alternatives have been

suggested, for example 'consultant 'rather than 'service user' (Angel and Ramon, 2009), the debate comes back to similar points. That is, the importance of language to understanding power relationships and how people experience shared definitions and labels. I have noticed the change in language over recent years as people have sought to find alternatives to 'service user'. People with' lived experience' and 'citizens' are commonly used. Most popular seems to be 'expert by experience' which aims to 'equalise power differentials to suggest that expertise by experience is every bit as valid as professional expertise' (Scourfield in McLaughlin, 2010, ibid). For example, Banks argues that the term 'expert by experience' goes beyond common forms of involvement as it is an expertise shared with and valued by many others (Banks, 2012).

Without wanting to risk overstepping the aforementioned boundaries of the literature review, this seems a timely place to mention that in my experience as a lecturer working alongside service users and carers in the teaching/classroom context, people felt uncomfortable with being described as an 'expert by experience'. In preference they used the term 'educator from experience' with the aim of putting everyone in an educator role on an equal level, educating from our different experiences. I prefer the term because it accentuates a more equal platform from which to educate, and I favour a break away from the traditional 'expert' role that my research aims to challenge. I concur with Braye (2000) that it is the intended meaning behind action which is most important. Mclaughlin also stresses that the meaning behind the language is crucial. The final point which the earlier definition provided by Shaping Our Lives made, is about recognising shared experiences of using services in a way that makes people feel more in control, having a stronger voice over service provision. This point is echoed through the social model of disability whereby people are disabled by the barriers in society, not by their impairment or condition. (Oliver, 1990, Cameron, 2014). McLaughlin concludes that the most important point is to refer to people in line with their preference. (McLaughlin 2009, 2021). Beresford concludes that more important than thinking about the way we describe people, is to concentrate on the way that we treat them. (Beresford and Carr, 2013). I agree with both conclusions.

The term 'carer' may seem less contentious as it is clearly defined to distinguish between informal (adult) carers and those in paid employment, put simply:

'A carer is someone who helps usually a relative or friend, in their day-to-day life. This is not the same as someone who provides care professionally or through a voluntary organisation'

(Carers UK, 2014).

*'A young carer is someone under 18 who provides or intends to provide care for another person. The concept of care includes practical or emotional support'. (*Carers Trust, 2015, p.2*).*

McPhail points out that the term is contested:

"There is no simple definition to distinguish different care relationships. The term carer is often used interchangeably across the literature to refer to family carers, informal carers, paid and unpaid carers" (McPhail, 2010, p.6).

For the purpose of my research, I apply the term 'carer' to the informal role. If I were to talk about the paid carer role in any context, I would specify as such to distinguish this. I would also like to point out that in my experience of working alongside young people, they have rejected labels such as 'service user'. They have expressed the importance of having their individual views and voices heard, not as 'LAC' (Looked after Children) or 'UASC' (Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children). These are widely used terms which seem to me to be particularly disrespectful in going as far as to use an abbreviation to define a group of young people. Studies highlight how young people wish to be recognised as individuals, a whole person, not to be overly identified as a child with a particular problem. (Hill, 1999, Morgan 2006, Curtis 2006, Oliver, 2010, Dodds et al, 2018).

The observations of Mark Garavan on the contemporary relevance and enduring inspiration of Freire's work are pertinent here:

*'Our education system remains co-opted into an economic imperative centred on growth and inequality. Certain voices and certain words are today reduced to silence in the public sphere. How to speak straightforwardly out of one's direct experience remains problematic. Oppressed groups are obliged to translate their concerns into other language, especially the language of economics and business. Even the term 'the oppressed' is politically potent and almost never used to designate an empirically identifiable group of people' (*Garavan, 2010,p.2).

A final observation to make on this subject of terminology and definitions, is how much more used the term of reference 'person with lived experience' now is. This is something I come to explore as it gains more meaning to me during my research and is discussed in Chapter five. As definitions develop, it is important not to lose sight of the structural oppression that is the main source of distinguishing someone's lived experience.

2.3.2. Literature from experience.

It is fifty years since Mayer and Timms published The Client Speaks (1970). Building on Biestek's seminal work (1957), 'The Casework Relationship', which established seven principles; individualization, purposeful expression of feelings, controlled emotional involvement, acceptance, non-judgemental attitude, client self-determination and confidentiality, the importance of relation based social work was revealed. In their pioneering exposition of relationship- based social work, Mayer and Timms sought to raise the profile of service users' experiences of social work. Research conducted with sixty-one clients of the family welfare association in London introduced the importance of engaging with clients to promote better outcomes for intervention. It had a significant impact on social work as other writers and researchers developed some of the themes for building positive relationships, as astutely observed by Michael Preston Shoot:

"*It was clear that social workers could not assume that their clients would fit into preconceived professional norms. Rather, relationship was something to be discussed and developed uniquely in each case*". (Preston Shoot, 2008 p. 819).

In his review of this book almost four decades later, Preston Shoot highlights some pertinent points. Firstly, that the book understates the benefits of involving service users in social work research. Secondly that it acknowledges that client opinion may lead to a shift in perspective and refine ideas about social work intervention. Thirdly, that it is cautious about which service users might be involved and hesitant about the reliance that can be placed on what they say. He concludes that the 'Client Speaks' remains relevant for this reason, 'for highlighting the uncertainty with which social work and policy makers continue to view service users', Preston Shoot, (ibid). I agree; despite the significant progress that has been taken to formally involve services users in social work education, this level of uncertainty

continues to be a barrier between people receiving services and those providing them. Perhaps one reason for this uncertainty comes down to language, with the use of the term 'client'. I have found it illuminating to discover in McLaughlin's recent chapter, (2021, p.34), that the origins of 'client' come from the early 'almoners' who referred to 'clients' and patients in their role as medical social workers. This echoes my earlier point as it depicts how the professional/client relationship was played out where:

'*Power is located within the social worker who is the one with specialist knowledge and skills and able to decide on the best course of action to ameliorate the client's problems*' (McLaughlin, ibid)

In this sense, one could say that the title of Mayer and Timm's book gives away the plot. Interestingly, 'The Client Speaks' has also informed research and discussion around the 'voice' of the social worker. Jean Gordon has based her narrative research on the voices of social workers, starting from the same point as Mayer and Timms, in identifying the absence of the client's voice. Building on the work of other authors who have noted that the 'parallel process of social workers voice being marginalised and silenced' Jones conducted research to promote ways in which they can be heard and have an influence. (Gordon, 2018, p.1333).

At the time of Mayer and Timms' publication, Sherry Arnstein (1969) had just produced a 'ladder of participation' for citizen involvement that established a foundation for getting to grips with how best to promote participation and empowerment. The ladder was based on Arnstein's work within the Model Cities Program to effect change in the way that planners and governments and communities think about citizen participation. The model had significant impact across a range of sectors and has contributed a significant body of knowledge to social work (Hart, 1997, Stayaert, 2010, Gaber, 2019). How involvement was beginning to evolve in social work education was being mirrored in similar debates in health and social care practice. The typology of eight- levels of participation identifies 'non-participation' on the bottom rung's 'tokenism' on the middle two and 'citizen power' on the top three.

Arnstein asserts.

"*Obviously, the eight -rung ladder is a simplification, but it helps to illustrate the point that so many have missed-that there are significant gradations of citizen participation. Knowing*

these gradations makes it possible to cut through the hyperbole to understand the increasingly strict demands for participation from the have nots as well as the gamut of confusing responses from the powerholders". (1969, p.217).

The metaphor of the ladder has had a lasting impact on academic inquiry, policy, and practice, providing a framework for designing, implementing, and evaluating participatory actions. Criticisms of the ladder have developed over time as new forms of participation have developed, challenging the linear notion of participation which does not reflect the complex interplay of power dynamics. Further, the implication that only the approach of actors from level to level can challenge the dominant model suggests that the higher levels are accepted as positive and the lower levels as negative when it can in some circumstances be the other way round. (Collins and Raymond 2006). Arnstein has herself criticised the model observing that "*in the real world of people and programs, there might be 150 rungs with less sharp and 'pure' distinctions among them*" (ibid). Gaber (2019) observes the widely recognised problem with the ladder is Arnstein's framing of citizen participation as an overt struggle for power between government officials (them) and community activists (us) which the primary focus of disenfranchised community groups in the middle. He confirms that Arnstein was being provocative in her account of citizen participation in the Model Cities program to educate community groups about the 'Mickey Mouse ' citizen participation game. (Arnstein in Gaber, ibid, p. 190).

Nonetheless, the impact of the model cannot be underestimated. It came from a decade of civil rights movements and unrest. Across the globe social movements were emerging, people were demanding a say in their lives and 'participation' was not enough. As Ferguson has argued.

"*At best it could amount to little more than tokenism: at worst it was a means of engaging them in their own oppression….these discussions are not merely of historical interest: the same ambiguities and contradictions permeate the varieties of participation on offer today and the debates that surround them*" (Ferguson in Beresford and Carr, 2018, p.245).

A further aim of my research is to contribute to the literature base by introducing a new strategy for promoting an equal platform where all voices can be heard. I suggest, at this

time of writing, that there is a parallel development with the need for practitioner's experiences and voices to catch up with service users, as Jones has observed (in Gordon, ibid). I would extend this to include students who are often aligned with professionals whilst in training yet could feel powerless in their student role. Developments which reflect the way in which higher education endeavours to widen participation, promote diversity and be more inclusive of people from different backgrounds have underpinned key policy initiatives for over fifty years (Barr, 2014). The significance of life experience as a factor informing career choice for social work students was researched in one university as far back as 1998 and found to be a 'neglected form of knowledge' (Christie, 1998). Articles which have come from people's experiences of moving from 'service user to service provider' address some of the difficulties that care leavers, former mental health service users, people who have experienced domestic violence can encounter (McGregor, 2010, Gerlach 2015, Smith, 2019,). MacGregor (ibid) concludes that whilst the general view is that people with lived experiences can have greater empathy with those they are supporting in similar contexts, what is most important is that people can manage the personal and professional demands of social work. The Social Work Reform Board reviewed universities' admissions process with this in mind to ensure emotional resilience was assessed from the outset by candidates.

"*Whether they can demonstrate that they understand what's needed to be a social worker or whether they are still in the role of being a service user*". (McLenachan in McGregor, ibid p.1)

This statement clearly highlights the tension in this dichotomy; the implication being that a person may be stuck in the role of service user, seen as the person with the problems, lacking power, and knowledge (a receiver), to such a degree that they are unable to see things from the perspective of the social work role, holding knowledge and power (a giver). Tilly (1998) has highlighted how easily relationship patterns become institutionalised; how the 'giver' and 'receiver' roles form binary pairs separated by clear boundaries that can contribute to 'durable inequality'. It could therefore be argued that by placing such focus on the admissions process, the inequality between the roles of social worker and service user are being delineated from the outset. The recent introduction of the Social Work Degree

Apprenticeships (Department for Education, 2018) aims to develop a sustainable workforce, that is more representative of the community it serves. It will be interesting to evaluate beyond the first cohort if it has attracted a greater number of 'apprentices' with lived experiences of social work services. Before getting to the foreground, the background to involvement now follows.

2.3.3 Background to involvement.

The changing political climate has accounted for the reforms of social work and social work education since the late 1979 when New Right Conservatism was established. Harris (2014) has provided a useful framework to illustrate how neoliberal ideas and processes have]impacted the previous and current context for social work education. Ferguson (2013) and Lavalette (2017) are amongst commentators who have written extensively on this subject demonstrating how inequality has been increased by the neoliberal agenda. This is essential to highlight, even though it is beyond the scope of this review to explore, given that the context for my research includes participants who experience high levels of inequality. For the purpose of this review, focus has been placed upon literature predominantly from the 1990's to present day. The reason for starting at this point is because this was when service user involvement was developing in teaching of the Diploma in Social Work (DIPSW) introduced in 1991, (which took over from the Certificate and Qualification in Social Work one-year route introduced in 1975).

The introduction of the DIPSW coincided with the introduction of the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990 which had the laudable aim of placing more focus on service user involvement in assessment processes. In parallel with developments in legislation, The Central Council for Training and Education (CCETSW) commissioned a report in 1994:

'Changing the Culture: Involving Service Users in Social Work Education' (in Beresford et al, 1994).

The timing of this report coincided with completion of my own social work training. The aim of the report was to develop a meaningful approach to involvement as summarised by Peter

Beresford whose work has had a considerable influence on me as a student, practitioner, and researcher:

'*The empowerment of service users is an important part of social work practice and is being given increasing emphasis in the development of social work initiatives at the vocational, professional and post qualifying levels*',

(Beresford, 1994, p.1)

One of the reasons why Peter Beresford's work has had such a wide impact is due to the valuable contributions he has made to the promotion of service user and carer voices as a significant force in research and policy development (Beresford et al, 1999, Beresford and Croft 1993, Beresford and Turner, 1997, Beresford, 2016). This is particularly because he draws from his own experiences as a mental health service user and ensures that his writing is based on people's lived experiences of services. He explains in his book on 'Being a mental health service user' (Beresford, 2010,) that his reason for wanting people to know about his experience as a psychiatric patient is not to be defined by this, but "*rather it is about being open and honest*" (ibid, p.9). Explaining why he made this personal choice, he acknowledges that others may wish to keep things private, concluding that:

'*Sometimes it is wisest because of power inequalities to be quiet about who we are. But if this book and similar initiatives help one person to feel less guilty or ashamed about themselves, work through what has happened to them, feel they don't have secrets unless they want to and get to grips better with demons they may have had, then in my mind, it has been worthwhile*'. (Beresford, ibid).

I was reminded of this message when a participant in a focus group said that people who had experiences of services, 'owed it' to others to share this (FG3). He was basing this view on people who had negative experiences from which professionals could learn, so that others did not suffer similar treatment. Without getting into the discussion points this raises, which are more aligned to the research findings (chapter four), it is interesting to highlight the contrast of views. Personally, I am aligned to the view that people should have the right to choose what they wish to share and what they wish to keep private. However, I also think that it is worth reflecting on the reasons why sometimes people choose not to

talk about their personal experiences. As introduced in chapter one, this is very much a feature of my personal research journey, later discussed (chapter five).

Throughout the literature search I have acknowledged those authors who are professionals (academics or practitioners) or service users, or both. Mostly, people identify as one or the other. Where people identify as both it appears that their experience of being a service user has come before recovery and working in an academic context. I can only go as far as suggesting this summary based on how people identify themselves from the literature I have reviewed. Of course, evidencing this more thoroughly would be a piece of research in itself. It raises important questions about how open and honest people feel they can be in the academic and professional context. And what the barriers are which prevent those who often declare their openness and honesty as a core value, from being open and honest about their experiences as service users. Authors who identify as professionals such as Doel, and Best (2008), Braye and Preston Shoot (2005), Cree and Davis (2007), Molyneux and Irvin (2004), McPhail (2008), want to give greater voice to those who directly experience social work to challenge the knowledge that drives social work as an activity. Authors who identify as having been at the receiving end of services such as Jan Wallcraft (2010), Suzie Carr (2004), Colin Barnes (1990), Michael Oliver (1990), Fran Branfield (2009), and Peter Beresford (2010), to name but a few, want to promote the value of experiential knowledge in research, education and practice to challenge explanations and what counts as accepted knowledge informed by professional research. What research that comes from people's experiences most strongly conveys are messages about being treated as human beings with rights, as equals in society:

'Like a human being, I was an equal, I wasn't just a patient: Service user's perspectives on their relationships with staff in mental health services.' (Bacha, Hanley and Winter, 2019)

'Beyond the Usual Suspects', report of a three-year study 'to offer practical help to develop more inclusive involvement for the future so that everyone who wants to be involved has equal opportunities to do so'(Beresford, 2013).

This is echoed in the literature on service user involvement in social work:

'*The challenge is to take notice of the very useful experience that can present new knowledge for people to learn from about me as a human being not scientific experiment*' (Widerlöv, 2021, p1).

'*It is important to Mrs. Corbett that the workers appreciate her and her husband as people who are more than the sum of their needs and disabilities; people with a history as well as a present*' (Doel and Best, 2008, p.38)

I suggest the growing field of social work literature over the past twenty years which comes from people's direct lived experience, is a positive reflection of the formal recognition of service user and carer involvement in social work education. The invitation for people who have experienced oppression to promote change within professional education supported with 'ring fenced' government funding, is unique to social work education. The value of this involvement has recently begun to be explored with new research and literature, (Hughes, 2017, Beresford et al, 2018, and Mclaughlin et al, 2021). It is apparent that literature has largely focussed on the *processes* of involvement. Consequently, research into the outcomes of involvement has been limited. This seems to me, to be a huge gap that my own research aims to mend. I shall now turn to research and literature that has also raised this question.

2.3.4. Impact of involvement – what difference does it make?

There is now a substantive amount of literature on the various ways in which service users and carers are involved in social work student's learning. A good starting point to this is a list produced by Jill Anderson (2013) which summarises twenty research articles on the various ways that service users and carers are involved in the assessment of student learning. Twelve of these articles are specific to social work. The others are specific to mental health nursing and action research. The inter professional interests in service user and carer involvement share common aims (Nursing and Midwifery Council 2010, General Medical Council 2011, Health and Care Professions Council 2012, National Health Service, 2014).

It could be argued that social work is the richer relative in this professional family context, as the privileged profession receiving government funding to achieve its aims. Literature about involvement has tended to focus on processes and models, with the benefits of involvement implicit to this; benefits which may be summarised as the value of involvement, e.g., increasing empathy, communication skills, developing partnership

working (Duffy and Hayes, 2012, Tew et al, 2012, Beresford and Boxall, 2012 ,). Equally, the criticisms of involvement have tended to focus on lack of diversity (Robson et al, 2008, Angel and Ramon, 2009) and resistance from academics to relinquish power in assessment processes (Advocacy into Action 2006, Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2004). Beresford (2013) calls for infrastructures which provide ongoing opportunities for people to get involved, enabling relationships and trust to be built. He argues this is key to involving 'hard to reach' service users (ibid,p.13). My research supports this view as my findings will later demonstrate (chapter five). I have also found that the barriers inherent within academic cultures as other authors have identified (Branfield, 2009, Fox ,2011, Beresford and Boxall, 2012, Irvine et al, 2014), must change if involvement is ever truly and meaningfully going to be achieved. The positions of universities as gatekeepers of knowledge maintaining hierarchical structures, has been challenged over recent years. Initiatives such as the 'Connected Communities Programme' has changed the landscape towards collaborative outcome focussed community-university relationships (Facer and Enright, 2016). What the previous commentators point out is the need for service users and carers to lead on involvement initiatives. In my view the landscape for social work education needs to change (discussed in Chapter five). What these commentators also agree upon is what is missing; a planned approach to evaluating the impact of involvement in education and consequently, the impact in practice. It is this link between education and practice that I feel is essential to exploring impact. It is essential to make clear the distinction between measuring the benefits and value of involvement and evaluating what changes and improves in practice as a result.

Early inquiry into the effectiveness of involvement in social work services was made in 2004; when the first cohort of social work students who had experienced involvement in their formal education, were working towards graduating as newly qualified practitioners. Sarah Carr (2004) undertook research on behalf of the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) with the question; 'Has service user participation made a difference to social care services?' Key findings from this report argued that:

"At local and regional levels, policy makers would be advised to integrate change mapping and feedback into the whole participation process. Monitoring and evaluation techniques should be developed with service users"(ibid,p.28). Also, "that organisational culture and

structure also needs to respond and change in order to accommodate new partnerships and new ways of working with people who have often been oppressed and marginalised" (ibid,p.28).

Although this research did not make explicit links with involvement in social work education, I think that for social work education this research was timely. It began with reviewing research from a decade earlier and seminal work prior to that. In this sense, this review was establishing a firm basis for establishing the extent of current knowledge which found that 'all reviews conclude there is a lack of research, monitoring and evaluation on the impact and outcomes on service user participation in general'. Though the focus of the research was on service provision, the concluding messages for policy and practice were in my view as relevant to social work education. So much so, that I feel it was a pity the report did not pick up on this and add an explicit recommendation for social work education. The establishment of SCIE coincided with the establishment of the new degree. A specified aim of this report was to provide a basis for SCIE practice guides on service user participation which have subsequently largely focussed on education. Therefore, in my view, this research which provided fifteen recommendations for practitioners, managers and policy makers was a highly relevant starting point for planning and implementing service user involvement in social work education. This is especially due to the emphasis placed on promoting change. The recommendations included:

- clarity of purpose of participation,
- accessibility,
- working with local service user led groups,
- ensuring commitment to meaningful involvement from all,
- awareness of power relations throughout the process,
- sharing information and decision making,
- valuing experiential knowledge,
- promoting diversity and regularly revisiting structures to promote flexibility and creativity,
- providing necessary resources for involvement,
- ensuring feedback ,

- actively seeking to involve those who are generally excluded from such opportunities.

Not unlike the Nolan principles (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 1995) established to make ethical standards explicit within parliament and public life, promoting and maintaining high standards requires continual and proactive attention. Without this intense commitment, arguably, such recommendations, like the Nolan principles, in and of themselves lack teeth.

Coinciding with Carr's publication, another was produced by SCIE to recommend good practice in relation to involvement in social work education (Levin, 2004). This included a key message for the future;]

'*Each social work education programme needs to have robust systems in place for monitoring and evaluating their arrangements for involvement*' and that '*comparative studies are required to evaluate their relative effectiveness in terms of processes and outcomes*' (Levin, 2004 p.2).

It is my contention later discussed and demonstrated by my own research, that this has largely not happened. A later research report from SCIE published in 2012 reviewed evidence of impact eight years on. This acknowledged the development of a wide variety of creative processes and identified that 'a much more robust evidence base is required to find out what difference involvement is making in the longer term…a need for systematic evaluation of the impact of involvement on learning and practice…and that service users and carers should be involved in designing research' (Wallcraft et al, 2012, p.7). Notably this research was undertaken at the point where the GSCC and College of Social Work were being abolished. Therefore, it was once again timely 'to review existing practice and propose recommendations for the future' (ibid, p.8). Aside from SCIE, Robinson and Weber were some of the earliest commentators on the impact of involvement, reporting little evidence of its effect and outcomes. They studied the 'meaningful involvement of service users and carers in advanced level post-qualifying social work', where they highlighted a gap in the guidance which had focussed on undergraduate not post qualifying education. They concluded that:

"Social work may benefit considerably by focussing more on devising evaluation methodologies that can produce high-quality evidence about service users and carer involvement' and that 'This is currently sadly lacking". (Robinson and Webber, 2011, p.16)

This review was timely as the Social Work Reform Board was working towards developing new post - qualifying programmes by transforming social work agencies into learning organisations. They developed this research further in 2013 and their study and other studies they reviewed (twenty – nine) concluded that there is insufficient empirical evidence to demonstrate; either that service user involvement improves outcomes for students or that it has a favourable effect on social work practice or outcomes for future service users (Robinson and Weber 2013). This has started to change, with recently published work with a focus on 'gap mending' as 'an analytical tool for students, service users and practitioners to reflect on the gaps which maintain distances between people' (Heule, Knutagard and Kristiansen 2017, Askheim, Beresford and Heule, 2018). I aim to establish how I have contributed to developing this concept for promoting collaborative learning and improved outcomes for service users and students. (Beresford et al in Chiapparini E., 2016, Casey, 2018, Abdullah et al in McLaughlin et al, 2021). My research presents a new evidence base for developing the concept of 'gap mending' by applying a participatory action research approach and demonstrating the adaptability of the approach as a model for co-production.

The growth of co-production, originated from the work of Eleanor Ostrom in the 1970's, who sought to promote citizens as active agents rather than passive recipients of services. The idea has since undergone considerable renewal and revival to become a mainstream concept central to the reform of public services (Boyle et al,2010). This is explored in more depth in the next chapter (three) however a quote from Gibson (2020) introduces the contested nature of defining co-production here:

"Is this just the latest bit of jargon to add to the already bewildering terminological soup that (ironically) surrounds public involvement? Is it adding anything new or is it a re-bottling of old wine in different bottles, with a smart new label?" (Gibson, 2020, p.1).

My research gets to the core of this debate by proposing 'Mend the Gap' as a model for co-production. I present this as a new and innovative approach, central and necessary to restructuring involvement in social work and potentially other professional education. Co-

production is now seen as being integral to social work education (Social Work England, (SWE) 2019), yet my research indicates this is largely not happening. In my view this is essential to promoting effective outcomes which increasingly is being expected.

Tanner et al conducted a study at Queens University, Belfast and Birmingham University, England (2017) which asked the question; 'What impact does service user and carer involvement have on the skills, knowledge and values of student social workers at the point of qualification and beyond?' The focus on the impact of involvement upon student learning at qualifying level and six to nine months following was interesting and new. This study built on the gaps identified by Webber and Robinson (2012) who acknowledged methodological difficulties with evaluating the impact of service user and carer involvement in practice separate from organisational and other practices. Tanner et al's research was small scale involving nine students in practice and acknowledged the potential bias in terms of interviewing those who felt positive about involvement. None the less, the findings revealed that service users and carer participation was highly valued, noting:

'*Some students acknowledge that their own experience as service users or carers were significant in their learning while others talked about what they had learned from people they worked with as service users on placement. Disentangling the impact of these different learning mechanisms was not possible*'. (Tanner et al, 2017, p.26)

Ultimately the research recommended a broader longitudinal study suggesting ways for 'post qualifying social work programmes to reconnect with the value of service user knowledge', (p.28). Other studies have found similar levels of ambivalence, depending on the types of involvement and impact on practice. One international study compared the UK experience with Belgium and Holland. (McLaughlin et al, 2016). Findings from this highlighted the 'fragile' nature of collaboration within the various projects, the need for improved organisational support and recommended 'further investment in sharing international learning' (ibid, p.11). Some innovative studies have come from Dundee University, Scotland. For example, one involved student spending time with service users and carers in their own home with carers involved in their reflective practice reports from this (Gee et al, 2009). Another focussed on outcomes focussed model for involvement in social work education applying experiential knowledge to practice. (Levy et al, 2016). This is particularly significant given that funding was removed from the budget in Scotland in 2010

yet the commitment to the requirement continues. This was certainly echoed when I conducted a focus group in Scotland which had the largest number of participants than anywhere else, I visited in the UK.(see chapter four).

Another research project involving 20 participants at qualifying and post qualifying level found that most people felt that learning from service users' experiences informed their development as practitioners:

'*In many cases it enabled students to develop as empathic practitioners but also provided guidance on how to demonstrate this in their practice, how as well as why*'. (Hughes, 2017, p.22)

I feel the conclusions from this research present rich insight into the importance of having meaningful conversations from which students can learn, critically reflect upon and appreciate more the complexity of social work practice. (ibid). A recent participatory action research study from the Netherlands has flipped the focus of students learning by using their own experiential knowledge rather external service user's experiences. (Weerman and Abma, 2019). I consider this research to be extremely forward thinking as it directly addresses the imbalance that exists between people's roles that is so often not talked about.

The researchers observe that:

'*Peers may use experiential knowledge and develop an intimate and personal relationship with the service users, but professionals have to follow protocols*' which they state produces a 'duality of knowledge'. This becomes more problematic as:

'The *tension between students of social work becoming professionals who are not supposed to use their experiential knowledge and ex-service users becoming experiential experts is leading to confusing situations*' (ibid, p.454).

Joanna Fox explored these issues through her own experience of revealing her personal journey as a service user in her role as a social work lecturer (Fox ,2016). She has explored the 'personal costs' of involvement in social work education from her own unique personal perspective. She describes how 'this means having to wear the mask that many service users wear to hide the experience that makes them expert', concluding that, 'It is important

to enable us to become part of the academic community as equals, whilst addressing our needs as service users. '(2016, p.969). Weerman and Abma's (2019) research project conducted over a seven-year period (three years preparation and four years implementation) demonstrated how the experiential knowledge of professional social workers can be integrated into the curriculum concluding that:

'*We have demonstrated that the curriculum profited from this process: room for experiential knowledge strengthened a form of development that fits in with the values of social work;*' (ibid. p.467).

To me such research indicates how debate has expanded upon 'how' to involve service users, the processes and models for involvement toward greater inclusion. My research builds upon this by considering **who** to involve addressing the questions relating to both the **how** and **impact** questions. Banks et al, (2017), use the term 'co-impact' as an 'umbrella term referring to the generation of change as a result of individuals, groups and organisations working together' (p.2). This is another key mechanism for cultural change which is incorporated in my own research to which I shall return. Freire's core message for social workers refers to their capacity to bring about changes that are humanistic, which I feel captures some of the debate on the impact of involvement; The purpose (of the social worker's role) is to become conscious together 'with people, with 'the real difficulties of their society' which suggests that 'the social worker needs to be broadening his/her knowledge, not only of methodology and technique, buts also of objective limits faced'. (Freire in Caroll and Minkler, 2000, p.26).

Beresford further captures the purpose of relating experiential theory to practice:

'The greater the distance between direct experience and its interpretation, then the more likely resulting knowledge is to be inaccurate, unreliable and distorted'. (Beresford, 2003).

I shall now conclude this literature review chapter with an exploration of theory which draws together the key elements of a robust literature review, establishing the firm basis which my own research has developed from.

2.3.5. Theoretical Frameworks.

There is a discourse about the use of theory in research and from the plethora of definitions I have selected one offered by Collins and Stockton (2018) as a clear starting point. I selected this on the basis that it straightforwardly defines components and their interconnectedness. I also noted how often it was cited by other authors thus acknowledging academic credibility.

'A theoretical framework is the use of a theory (or theories) in a study that simultaneously conveys the different values of the researcher(s) and provides a clearly articulated signpost or lens for how the study will process new knowledge. A theoretical framework is at the intersection of:

1. Existing knowledge and previously formed ideas about complex phenomena

2. The researcher's epistemological dispositions, and

3. A lens and a methodically analytic approach.'

(Ibid, 2018)

This fundamental basis demonstrates how theory is integral to a study, noting that; 'Theory free research does not exist '(Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

Colins and Stockton have pulled together a range of literature on the subject as a basis for 'advancing the role of theory in the qualitative toolbox', which I have found most helpful in getting to grips with the value of theory for my research. As the definition is presented as an intersection of key facets, theory is integral to the research design and values. For this reason, I shall briefly introduce key theories which underpin my research design and values, though demonstration of how they apply will expand into other sections of the thesis.

i. Experiential theory.

It has already been explained that my research study has been based upon experiential knowledge and learning. Collins and Stockton (ibid) cite Zita's simple statement:

'*Theory can live within and emerge from our lived experiences, moving "from our lips to the streets*"' (Zita, 1998 in Collins and Stockton, ibid, p.3).

Drawing from experiential theory they quote bell hooks, whose work has contributed significantly to understanding the experiences of men and women in prison,

'…*who dare to create theory from the location of pain and struggle, who courageously expose wounds to teach and guide, to chart new theoretical journey. Their work is liberatory.*' (hooks in Collins and Stockton, ibid p.3).

This resonates with my ontological and epistemological approach inspired by Freire's basic assumption that:

'*Man's ontological vocation is to be a Subject who acts upon and transforms his world*' (1970 p.14).

Freire presents a world view that people need not accept the reality they are given. Rather, they should see a problem that needs to be worked on (ibid).As much as I both value and praise Freire's work, his patriarchal focus warrants criticism. I concur with feminist critics that it is salient in male references as another quote from bell hooks explains:

"*There has never been a moment when reading Freire that I have not remained aware of not only the sexism of the language but the way he (like other progressive Third World political leaders) constructs a phallocentric paradigm of liberation wherein freedom and the experience of patriarchal manhood are always linked as though they are one and the same*." (1993 in Ohliger, 1995)

This is further qualified by Brady:

"*Not only are women erased in Freire's language of domination and struggle, there is no attempt to even acknowledge how experience is gendered differently. A feminist re-reading of Freire has argued against his exclusive focus on class as the only form of discrimination*." (Brady 1994, in Ohliger 1995, V111).

There are many challenges to Freire's dominant focus on class struggle which has led to the marginalisation of women and other subjects. It has been excellently summarised by Ohliger, (1995) who presents a thoroughly good literature review of key critics. Redressing the balance of Freire's patriarchal focus, the theoretical framework is informed my own epistemological stance in relation to Feminist theory, that is key to understanding women's subjective experience.

ii. Feminist Theory and Intersectionality.

Feminists have added a further dimension to the challenge to 'objective' research arguing that objective research is dominated by the way men see the world and recognising the importance of knowledge that is gained from sharing experiences (Harding 1991, Kelly 2004, Hartsock 2008). It is interesting to note that in the same year 'The pedagogy of the oppressed' was published, (1970) Carol Hanisch published her seminal paper 'The personal is political' which became the slogan for feminism (1970). I wonder if Freire took any note at all of the rising voices of women or, if as bell hooks describes as a 'source of anguish '….'it represents a blind spot in the vision of men who have profound insight."(hooks 1993 in Ohliger, 1995).

There is no commonly agreed definition of feminism due to the varied perspectives that come from different factions commonly agreed as 'liberal' , 'radical' and 'socialist' feminism (Collins 1986, Freeman, 1990, Saulnier, 2000, Dominelli, 2002,). Saulnier (2000) points out that it is important in social work to be understand the goals of these different factions of feminism to enhance flexibility and responsiveness to women's social and personal difficulties:

"*Different situations, different women, and different times call for different approaches to problem solving.*" (Saulnier, 2000, p.3).

I agree that social workers need to be equipped with such knowledge, and highly recommend Saulnier's paper (ibid) which explores these key factions in depth. In my view, the different responses Saulnier calls for, most relevant to my research, is the added intersectional dimension to feminist theory. The feminist movement has come under criticism for representing 'white, middle-class cisgender and able - bodied women' which has led to increased recognition of 'intersectional feminism'; that 'certain groups of women have multi-layered facets in life that they have to deal with' (Vidal, 2014):

"*The view that women experience oppression in varying configurations and in varying degrees of intensity. Cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society. Examples of this include race, gender, class, ability and ethnicity*". (Vidal, 2014 p.1)

As Vidal has observed, I find it interesting that the term intersectionality was introduced as far back as 1989-by Professor Kimberlie Crenshaw-yet it took over two decades to be included in discourse. This has generated both acceptance and confusion over what it represented. According to McCall (2005):

"*Intersectionality is the most important contribution that women's studies have made so far*". (p.1771).

The intersectional feminist framework was essential to understanding the diverse experiences of participants in my research. It was also essential to my own reflexivity as a researcher. The intersectional feminist perspective adds an important dimension to the significance of power in all relationships which leads into the next theory.

iii. Empowerment Theory

Freire (1970) and Hanisch (1970), both explored the interrelated aspects of empowerment. I view empowerment theory as essential to understanding individuals in relation to the bigger social and political environment. However, it is a widely contested theory. Banks argues that it holds a wide variety of meanings ranging from the 'consumerist approach' that gives limited choices to service users to the 'citizenship approach' of power sharing. And the 'radical approach' that encourages individuals and groups to recognise their own power and take action for themselves'. (Banks, 2006, p.120)

Thompson concludes it is a concept that has been over simplified, that the complex multi-faceted nature of empowerment has been reduced to a mis leading level of 'sound bites' which has led to 'not only a great deal of misperception but also a certain amount of ill-feeling as many individuals have been left feeling alienated by a maladroit or inept over simplistic approach doing more harm than good'. (Thompson, 2006, p.1). It is interesting to note that the concept has come under scrutiny in relation to the defining of social work. The International federation of Social Work referred to 'the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well -being' in 2000 and removed the well-being aim with its revised definition in 2014 to: 'the empowerment and liberation of people.' To me this amendment cut through contentious discourse. It re-connects with the origins of the concept of

empowerment emanating from the literature and movements for promoting awareness of marginalised people, capable of finding their own resources to find solutions to their own problems. Empowerment theory is necessary to understanding the relationship between oppression, power and change which is why it is an important theory as well as value for social work. Issues of 'power' and 'empowerment' are a consistent theme of this thesis which will be further explored. The final theory underpinning my work I feel brings together all elements of other theories which focus on human experience.

iv. Social Construction Theory.

The central tenet of social constructivism is that human learning and knowledge is constructed through social interaction and is a shared rather than an individual experience (Vygotsky, 1934, 1987). This is important to distinguish from 'cognitive constructivism' that sees knowledge as actively constructed by learners based on their cognitive development (Piaget, 1936). It is equally important to distinguish from 'radical constructivism' that states all knowledge is constructed rather than perceived through senses (Glaserfeld, 1974). Vygotsky rejected these two concepts on his firm belief that it is not possible to separate learning from its social context.

Freire's view that learning is based on dialogue, contributed to social constructivism (Gordon, 2009). Freire developed 'critical constructivism' that connects power to knowledge, encourages greater personal and social consciousness and motivates people to take constructive action. Freire conceived the 'banking concept' based on:

'*The assumption of a dichotomy between human beings in the world: a person is merely in the world, not with the world or with others; the individual is a spectator, not re-creator. In this view the person is not a conscious being*' (Freire, 1970 p247).

Counteracting the banking concept, Freire believed:

'*Every human being, no matter how ignorant*' *or* '*submerged*' *in the* '*culture of silence*' *he or she may be is capable of looking critically at the world in a dialogical encounter with others*'. (Freire, 1998, p.14).

In this way, critical constructivism and social constructivism are closely aligned to my research. The focus on individual learning that takes place because of his/her interactions

with others, establishes a dialogue that is orientated towards achieving mutual understanding. Essentially, social constructivism is concerned with how knowledge is constructed and understood. It therefore, accepts there is an ontological reality however it has an epistemological not ontological perspective. Gergen explains:

"*How we hear and interpret other individual's experiences is affected by our own contexts and experiences, however as human beings we cannot be anything other than intricately involved together in the construction of our worlds.*" (Gergen, 2010, p.110)

Social constructivism and qualitative research have a mutual respect for human experiences which is integral to my role as researcher and the research dynamics. Roller and Lavrakas explain this natural alliance thus:

'*A quality approach is driven by the researcher's understanding and utilization of the socially constructed world (e.g. use of language, the imbalance of power) while the social constructions ultimately requires research outcomes that are useful'*. (Roller and Lavrakas, 2015, p.1).

I feel this quote suitably brings the theoretical framework summary to a close and paves the way towards the next chapter with a final quote for the literature review as it opened, from Freire:

'You can't have theory without practice; theory on its own is just words, practice on its own is just activism'. (1970, p.48)

2.3.6. Chapter Conclusion.

To conclude, this chapter draws together, the key findings from the literature which identifies an increasing demand for evidencing the impact of involvement and the value of experiential knowledge as a credible basis for undertaking research. The literature review set out to explore the move away from traditional research , whereby the researcher as 'expert', studies people as 'research subjects', towards more equal participatory approaches to research. As introduced in Chapter one, my research study has been based upon experiential knowledge and learning. This focus fits with a relatively new approach to research, which values the way in which experiential knowledge is accepted as a key and unique source of knowledge (Fricker, 2007). This is a significant challenge to the way in

which traditional research undertaken by those without direct experience, has been widely accepted as the most accurate knowledge. Epistemological debates around how knowledge is produced and validated is central to what is valued for social work education and practice (Beresford and Boxall, 2012). The growth of service user involvement in research and participatory action research over the past four decades has challenged traditional research methods. Emancipatory approaches to research conducted with those whose lives are under study and whom the research is intended to benefit, has generated new knowledge and insight from first - hand experiences. Fundamentally this has changed power relations in the research relationship. There is a wide variety of approaches to participatory research; as Reason (2001) asserts, 'it is not one school of thought'. Beresford (2002) defines two different approaches to participation:

'One is the 'consumerist approach'... which generally starts with policy and the service system… whereby external initiating agencies themselves decide what to do'. ..'The other is the 'democratic approach….which is rooted in people's lives...concerned with ensuring that participants have the direct capacity and opportunity to make change'. (p. 97).

'Mend the Gap' has been introduced as a democratic approach which fundamentally changes power relations from the outset. The concept of co-production is open to interpretation and requires clear definition to ensure genuine engagement and power redistribution within research and practice. The concept of gap mending as a reflective analytical tool has been developed by my research, providing a model for social work and other professional education. I argue that this presents a much-needed radical model of co-production at a timely point when this is required to be integral to social work education, yet many courses have not begun to embrace it. My research brings new evidence of outcome- focussed participation, adding to the existing literature base that specifically acknowledges research gaps around the impact of involvement. Some key critical theories have been introduced and are developed in the next chapter. Terminology which identifies the uniqueness of individuals as well as shared goals is significant to promoting respectful relationships based on mutual trust. Key reflective models have been defined to demonstrate understanding of the purpose and use of reflection which is evident throughout my research. Overall, the literature review has established a firm basis upon which to build my own research. It is not exhaustive as I have found that new literature

sources have emerged as new insight was gained during the research. The next chapter exploring methodology builds upon this.

Chapter Three.

Research: Methodology and Design.

3.1 Introduction:

The aims and objectives of my research have been outlined in chapter one. The overarching research question was '*What difference does service user and carer involvement make in social work education*?' The aim of addressing this question was to explore the impact of involvement from a range of perspectives (those contributing from their lived experiences and those experiencing this in their studies and practice). The objectives of the study were two-fold:

1. To capture the experiences of those who have directly contributed to or experienced involvement in social work education, to evaluate the impact of involvement and evidence of change.

2. To actively engage in Mend the Gap projects to identify new knowledge and outcomes and evaluate the impact of these projects and evidence of change.

The literature review undertaken in the previous chapter highlighted that to date, there is limited research to demonstrate the outcomes of involvement. This supports the rationale for my own research which has utilised an innovative approach and produced a new evidence- base founded on experiential knowledge. The chapter begins with a quote to establish the international context, as explained in chapter one, to reflect the shared aims and global values of social work.

"Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being". (International Federation of Social Work (IFSW), 2014).

Some of the key concepts from the international definition of social work in relation to the social work profession's core mandates, principles, knowledge and practice have been

helpfully outlined by the European Association of Schools of Social Work (EASSW), for example:

'The social work profession recognises that human rights need to coexist alongside collective responsibility...The uniqueness of social work research and theories is that they are applied and emancipatory.... Much of social work research and theory is co-constructed with service users in an interactive, dialogic process and therefore informed by specific practice environments....A social work definition can only be meaningful when social workers actively commit to its value and vision' (EASSW, 2014).

The central argument in this chapter is that it seems to me, fundamentally important that the research design and methodology for social work research are informed by the international vision and values. The challenges to purportedly 'objective' approaches to research have largely come from grass roots groups seeking to promote change and validate subjective knowledge and experience. The problem in social work education is that service user and carer involvement is largely driven by an academic agenda. This means that service users, carers and students have varying, and by no means always positive, experiences of levels and types of involvement. Outcome focussed research is scant. A key aim of this thesis is to explore the effectiveness and outcomes of involvement by promoting equality in the research process to develop experiential epistemology and new approaches to involvement in professional education. This chapter sets out the methodological approach underpinning the study upon which this thesis is based and the framework for conducting the research.

In Section one I begin with my own perspective as a researcher and subsequently introduce the overarching qualitative research paradigm which specifically is a Participatory Paradigm. The paradigm is supported by a theoretical framework identified in the literature review as integral to qualitative research design. The research methods used are discussed; namely Participatory Action Research and Focus Groups. The 'Mend the Gap' approach is introduced as a strategy for implementing the research and an innovative way of promoting the equal participation of service users and carers in social work education. The rationale for selecting this qualitative research paradigm as most appropriate to this inquiry is made clear.

Section two explains the research design including the selection of participants and data collection methods. The overall validity and reliability of the research is outlined, and research ethics scrutinised to include key considerations of consent, confidentiality and information sharing. Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) 'thematic analysis' is applied as a methodological process for data collection and analysis. Recorded evaluations from participants of Mend the Gap programmes, extend traditional boundaries of data collection and add to the depth and richness of the study. The limitations of the study are also considered. Together, these sections justify the approach to exploring the research question and generates 'evidence' from participant's voices and experiences.

Section one.

3.2.1 The Researcher.

Reason (1994) introduces himself as holding 'collaboration and participation as central values in his life'. Also, of internalising theoretical perspectives of 'participation' and 'dialectical approach' to develop a sense of purpose and guide behaviour (Reason, 1994,pp 50-53). This articulation helpfully resonates with my experiences personally and professionally. The focus of this study came from my experiences as a social worker and educator, working alongside people with lived experiences who wanted to improve social worker's training. A hypothesis was borne out of the purpose of involvement as it was formally introduced, that the meaningful involvement of service users and carers in social work education would positively influence social work practice. The question that service users and carers I worked with often asked was 'how do we know we are making a difference?' Further it was becoming widely acknowledged that there were many 'seldom heard' voices unheard in these processes (SCIE, 2008). As a reflective practitioner, this led me to question my own approach to involving people with lived experiences in educational systems, with the aim that their involvement could improve education and ultimately services.

The overarching research question for social work education; '*what difference does service user and carer involvement make*?' seemed to me to be the most important one. It reflected the conversations I was having with people who had been involved and it felt respectful to

establish the outcomes of all their efforts. As established in the literature review, I was aware this was becoming a pressing question for other educators, researchers and service users and carers. Equally I felt that if by exploring this question it was found that people were not making a difference, then their efforts could be wasted. Very quickly the obvious question to ask was feeling risky. Is this why some people resist change I wonder? If we stop to ask ourselves what we are doing and discover we are doing absolutely nothing we might have to change something! Based on this consideration, a key aim of undertaking the research was to ensure the research process was valuing of all contributions made. And participatory to ensure it reflected everyone's interests, not just mine as a researcher. Further, the focus of my research question also led me to consider what difference the research process could make. Establishing the research context has required me to consider axiological concerns in relation to the values I bring to the research process. As stated earlier, I have developed my skills as a reflexive researcher by critically reflecting upon the potential influence of my values throughout the research process. By participating jointly with research participants in a knowledge creation process I endeavoured to remain open to changing my own views which felt like getting rid of the map on a walk. I was open to wandering, getting a little lost but mostly I walked instinctively with the purpose of finding new landscapes. The map that had guided me throughout my career with its' clearly defined lines and paths began to feel out of date. I was discovering new routes which erased the lines that demarcated my professional role from my personal experiences. As a researcher I could see that it was necessary for me to integrate not separate my experiences to be genuine in challenging the categories that traditionally define and separate people in their roles. By applying Braun and Clarke's 'reflexive thematic analysis (TA)' (2006, 2019) to my data, (discussed in section two), I was guided throughout to be explicit with all aspects of my role which was central to knowledge production.

The rest of this section will explain how this was achieved.

3.2.2 Qualitative Research

The challenge for the qualitative researcher has been neatly summarised by Roller and Lavrakas, (2015):

*'Qualitative researchers are presented with the challenge of conceptualizing and implementing research designs that result in rich contextual data, while also incorporating principles of quality research to maximize the discovery of valid interpretations that lead to the ultimate usefulness (i.e., the "so what?") of their research'. (*In Roller, 2019, p.2*)*

Wertz et al (2011) also summarise the problem, stating: *"One of the greatest challenges facing human sciences and service professionals is the choice and application of research methods that respect the uniqueness, complexity and meanings of human experience"* (ibid, p. 1).

These insightful quotes could have led me to consider a range of methodological approaches. For example, 'Narrative inquiry' and 'Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis' present key qualitative methods for exploring and understanding human experience. Both approaches are focussed on experiential knowledge. Narrative inquiry is based on the premise that people tell their stories through personal narratives which creates a coherence between talking about their past lives to understand the present and meanings people attach to their experiences. (Connelly and Clandinin,1990, Lemley and Mitchell, 2011, Watson, 2009). This aligned with my research aim to promote better understanding of people's lived experiences. The basis of phenomenological inquiry fits very well with my values as a researcher as summed up by Von Manen; 'Phenomenological research is a search for what it means to be human' (1997,p. 12). Peter Reason has sought a similar focus on what it means to be human in the context of co-creating realities through participation (Reason, 1994) .

It is evident that several approaches within the qualitative paradigm for research share common characteristics but differ in their goals, research methods and role of the researcher. Whilst I was interested in individual experiences of involvement, I was also mindful of the way in which some people had been invited to 'tell their story' to social work students and practitioners. For example, IPC (Investing in People and Culture), the agency supporting refugees and asylum seekers who became involved with Mend the Gap projects, had often been asked if unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people could contribute to social workers training. The request was made for them to tell their traumatic stories to increase social workers' understanding of their situations. I appreciate how much more sensitively narrative inquiry could be undertaken than to invite young people to

describe their experiences to a group of strangers. However, discussing this with the IPC manager, influenced my choice of methodology towards a PAR approach. What we felt was needed was to co-create a space whereby people could identify their common concerns and shared goals to improve support for themselves and others in similar circumstances. This with the aim of improving structures and systems that impacted upon people in such situations. Indeed, emphasis was placed at the outset of the study to explain that there was no expectation for anyone to tell their individual stories; that this came down to personal choice. Four weeks into a Mend the Gap project, a young person spoke to the group about his plans with his best friend to travel from Eritrea to the UK. He described how they undertook together to raise funds for the journey. He also talked about their fears and sadness at leaving their families who they hoped would follow one day. Then he spoke of his devastation when he woke in the back of a lorry with barely any oxygen and found his friend dead by his side. His story sparked other similar tragic tales from other young people. One outcome of my research is my view that methodological approaches based on individual inquiry may be best placed once trust and relationships have been established. This point is discussed in a later chapter (five).

I decided that Social Constructivism was a good fit with a PAR approach because of the focus placed on an on an individual's learning that takes place because of their interactions in a group. Turko and Shapiro (2007) clarifies the relationship thus:

'I*f we conceive of constructivist philosophy as a foundation for our thinking, action research clearly is its mirror. That is, action research fundamentally reflects constructivist thinking in its process and practice. For example, the basic principle on which both operate is a search for meaning. Constructivism holds that we actively construct our own meanings and understandings of the world in which we live'* (pp 105-106).
Dragonis et al, (2015) helpfully point out the distinction that is traditionally made between constructivism and social constructivism in education:

"*For constructivists the site of construction is the individual mind. In effect, constructivism is strongly psychological, and in terms of education, is child centred. In contrast, social constructionists view the site of reality making within social process. In this sense,*

constructionism is neither child centred nor curriculum centred, but is relational" (2015 pp. xii, xiv).

Turko and Shapiro (ibid) further clarify the distinction between two schools of thought in social constructivism; 'the least controversial branch' – moderate social constructivism based on the premise that the social world is socially constructed. And 'especially hard for mathematicians and traditional scientists, this one is hard to swallow' – 'radical constructivism' based on the premise that 'hard sciences' e.g., biology, physics, chemistry, are socially constructed and as such cannot be studied objectively. Without expanding more than is necessary on this subject, for the purpose of clarity for this methodology, I shall be referring to the least controversial 'moderate social constructivism'. I strongly recommend Dr. Kenneth Gergen's video (2010) on 'social constructionist ideas, thinking and practice 'for further enlightenment on this subject. His overview on 'how social constructionists think' and apply their thinking to real world matters was a most useful foundation for my research. It enabled me to connect my thinking in respect of my research aim to develop relational skills and power identified in chapter one, with the focus on social and relational processes. Lincoln cautions that different practitioners may place different emphasis on action research and constructivist theory, 'so whilst the 'theory' of both may be similar, their practices may look very different' (Lincoln, 2001, p.124). Roller qualifies that,

 "Social constructionism is not one thing, not one theory or approach, but rather a "creative resource" that enables a new, expanded way of talking and thinking about concepts"(2015, p.3)

 My research adds to this point and a variety of different usages by introducing Mend the Gap as a new creative resource for participatory research. How we hear and interpret other individual's experiences is affected by our own contexts and experiences, 'however as human beings we cannot be anything other than intricately involved together in the construction of our worlds'. (Roller, 2015, p.3).This natural alignment interrelates with my role and the research dynamics. Social constructivism acknowledges the multiple realities people have due to their experiences and contexts which is essential to the interaction between researcher and participants (Baxter Magolda, 2001). I have sought to bring a range of perspectives to understanding the different research contexts. The interconnection

between myself as researcher, the participants and purpose of the research informed the methodological design of the study. Consideration was made to the use of multiple theories in research which has been recommended as a primary way for researchers to broaden their understandings. (Janesick ,2000 in Rodriguez et al, 2011 p.402).

Key theories which have informed my research introduced in chapter one; experiential theory, feminist intersectional theory and empowerment theory are connected by their core focus on power in relationships. In my view these theories have natural synergies with a range of theoretical perspectives where there are common interests around power and what it means to be disadvantaged and discriminated against. And ultimately what it means to be a citizen with equal rights. Feminism is not a single epistemology (Schwand, 2001) as highlighted by Rodriguez et al (2011). There are fundamentals which feminist researchers share:

1.   A focus on gender and power

2. A goal to conduct empowering research and,

3. An emphasis on alternative ways to conduct research (Olsen, 2005 in Rodriguez et al, ibid, p. 402).

These characteristics are present in a range of critical theories. They place emphasis on working with people, not on them and are key to acknowledging the significance of redressing the balance of power in the research context. Also introduced in chapter one, the intersectional perspective brings focus to the diversity of experiences which has underpinned the study. I have sought to ensure the methodology is underpinned by a culturally responsive perspective. Berryman et all (2013) propose that culturally responsive methodologies:

- Embraces cultural and epistemological pluralism
- Deconstructs Western colonial traditions of research
- Recognises the primacy of relationships within a power-sharing dialogical encounter.

 (Berryman, SooHoo and Nevin, 2013 in Berryman et al, 2013 p.3)

These authors assert that,

"Framing these phases are questions of ethics: what right does one have to engage in the study? Who will own the research? And who determines the public good of the research?" (Berryman et al, 2013 p.4).

These are helpful questions that have informed considerations of ethics discussed later.

Being culturally responsive incorporates a theoretical perspective of 'Critical Race Theory' (CRT), as Rodriguez et al explain,

' The specific goal of CRT is to 'trouble' conventional ways of conducting research by addressing intrinsic racism, which is enmeshed with society and frequently invisible to dominant powers' (Ladson-Billings, 2000). …involving challenges which are interpreted at an intersection of one's race, class, age, sexual orientation, and gender, and has historically pathologized marginalized groups' (Liamputtong, 2007 Rodriguez et al ibid, pp 402-403).

Culturally responsive methodology and critical race theory are particularly important to integrate with the research study which involves participants from asylum seeker communities. In my view, children arriving in the UK with no English, no connection with a single person and adults arriving in this country with no recourse to public funds, are the most marginalised in society. Freire viewed society as a constant evolving dynamic system through which power is woven and argued that the only way to empower people to understand dynamics and how power oppresses them is to raise their 'critical consciousness':

'For the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform. This perception is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for liberation; it must become the motivating force for liberating action.' (Freire, 1996 p.31).

These perspectives resonate with my experiences of Mend the Gap; of developing an approach which includes people who felt most marginalised and stigmatised in their experiences of receiving social work support, which was also their experiences of society. As a co-production model for creating new knowledge within social work education

contexts, this was a catalyst for taking research further; to take an open and critical search for collective discovery.

In summary, the methodology has been developed from a participatory, rights-based approach within a constructivist paradigm. I shall expand on this further with demonstrating how Mend the Gap adds to this basis. The methodological design of the study is explained next, followed by an explanation of how the findings were analysed between participant led frameworks and reflexive TA (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2013, 2019).

3.2.3 Methodology.

Methodology embraces philosophical questions on the nature of reality and knowledge construction (Padgett, 2016).

Clough and Nutbrown (2012) assert:

"A good methodology is a more critical design attitude to be found always at work throughout a study, rather than confined within a brief chapter called Methodology"(p.24).

The interplay of methodology accounted for in this chapter is evident throughout others. It has been necessary to address ontological and epistemological considerations from the outset, as described in the previous chapter. I shall clarify the methodological approach taken and more specifically the study design. The methods undertaken could be repeated though not replicated to achieve the same result. The nature of action research has been defined by Reason and Bradbury (2001), as 'an orientation and purpose of inquiry rather than a research methodology' (p.2). In this sense, replicating methods rigidly would be counter to the unique feature of action orientated research. By clarifying my approach and outlining methods undertaken in respect of PAR (participatory action research) my aim is to present an approach, namely 'Mend the Gap', that others can take forward and of which can repeat the features . The distinction of this approach is that outcomes are considered from the outset, yet they are determined by the process and unique opportunities which emerge. In this sense, each project establishes its own legacy.

The fundamental basis of the purpose of my research is to 'understand and change' as opposed to 'explain and evaluate' (Blaikie, 1993). Therefore, participatory research

methodology is in my view the most fitting way to achieve this. 'Participatory methodology needs to rest on a world view' explains Peter Reason (1994):

"It is not possible simply to tag co-operative inquiry or participative action research onto a world view that is primarily forged in a positivist or modernist perspective, with its deep-rooted assumptions about the separation of knower from what is known: this would result in an untenable situation, with methodologies which demand a collaborative ethos and practice resting on assumptions that demand separation". (p.1)

The work of Reason and Heron, (1997), has been most influential in presenting a Participatory Inquiry Paradigm. They build on the work of Guba and Lincoln (1994) who identified four main categories as major paradigms that frame research:

Positivism, Post-positivism, Critical theory and Constructivism.

The complete contrast between positivism and constructivism has been explained. Lincoln and Guba argue that post-positivism is an approach that has been developed in response to the different challenges of positivism, e.g., when studying or investigating a phenomenon to build theory within social sciences research. Heron and Reason have extended Guba and Lincoln's framework to articulate a participatory paradigm by arguing that a 'worldview based on participation and participative realities is more helpful and satisfying'. (Heron and Reason, 1997, p.1). As Freire based his critical pedagogy on the belief that persons are self - determining capable of becoming critical citizens, 'Co-operative experiential inquiry 'is based on a similar premise that a person has the potential to be the cause of his or her own actions (Heron, 1992 in Reason, 1994). Reason explains that if research is determined by the researcher, then those being researched are not present as persons as 'research can only be done in the true and fullest sense' (1994, p.41), if the research is directed by participants

"So, persons can only properly study persons when they are in active relationship with each other, where the behaviour being researched is self-generated by the researchers in the context of co-operation."(ibid, p.41).

The first challenge for me to consider was how widely the research methods could extend to retain the strength of a co-operative inquiry approach. My aim was to gather qualitative data and, in the process, reflect the diverse ways in which people can come together to

share their learning and increase the validity of the research. The primary orientation of this study was exploratory. I sought to better understand the experiences of those who had contributed to social work education and those who had learned from such contributions, with a shared goal to evaluate the impact of involvement. Further I sought to develop Mend the Gap with a PAR approach to demonstrate the distinctive contribution this approach can make.

Participatory research methodology can comprise of different methods with the aim of developing equitable and mutual relationships between and with participants. The significance of taking this approach fundamentally addresses issues of power which underpins the relationship between researcher and participants (Ebbs, 1996, Wolf, 1996, Brayton, 1997,Gergen and Gergen, 2000, Miller and Strier, 2009). By taking a collaborative approach to learning and co- creating knowledge, it felt possible to challenge the status quo and promote an alternative discourse with the aim of influencing education and practice. What is most important is that the outcome of the research for the participants is transformative. This is key to research which is emancipatory.

According to Oliver, emancipatory research is where the 'researcher and researched become changers and changed' and that 'the methodology of research must also change to build upon trust, respect, participation and reciprocity'. (Oliver, 1992, p.107). Oliver's work as a disability rights activist has significantly impacted on the way in which participatory research is conducted with disabled people. His criticism of research approaches which maintain oppressed people within oppressive structures, are illuminating for a wide range of contexts. According to Oliver, the key way to develop 'more useful and less alienating research' is about 'control' rather than experience, which he refers to as the 'changing of the social relations of research production'. (Oliver, 1992). Barnes also viewed the key difference between participatory emancipatory research as that of 'ownership and control' (Barnes, 2003). I feel it is important to reflect upon Oliver and Barnes' distinction as there are common principles between these two approaches which define the purpose of conducting research with people. These authors' insights are both interesting and controversial in the challenge to ensure that those being researched about their experiences are primarily in control of the research process. This value base has enabled me to examine my own role as researcher and the relationship between the researcher and researched.

For all reasons stated, my research methodology focus is on a PAR approach. However, to extend and capture wider involvement of participants' experiences of involvement in education, it was not feasible to take purely a PAR approach. It was important to include service users and carers who have contributed to social work education in a wide variety of ways, and to include students' experiences as well as practitioners who experienced involvement in their education. I aimed to ensure that a wide range of people had the opportunity to share their views and experiences in addition to those who could commit to taking part in a participatory programme. This led me to take a mixed methods approach by conducting focus groups in addition to Mend the Gap projects which fit within the participatory paradigm:

"*Focus group discussion is a participatory research method that has been effectively utilized in numerous social sciences disciplines either as a standalone method or more often alongside other methods*". (Kumar and Urbank, 2019,p.1)

These diverse methods will now be explained in relation to the research design.

3.2.4 Mend the Gap, PAR and Co-production.

Concepts of Mend the Gap, PAR and Co-production have distinct origins and features which are important to recognise. It is also useful to recognise the common interests which place emphasis on transformative ways of thinking about power, resources, diversity, relationships and outcomes. In my view, there are synergies between these approaches that are useful to explore. In this way, new structures can be created by embedding concepts which are central to all. As an outcome of my research, I have come to argue (with research participants as co-authors) for an alternative radical model of co-production that provides new structures for social work education and human services. (Casey et al, in McLaughlin et al, 2021, p.216). This is discussed in a later chapter (five),

These three concepts are now defined and their common interests highlighted.

Definition of 'Mend the Gap':

"*The gap-mending concept can be characterised as a reflective tool that helps teachers and researchers to consider what, in their practice increases, maintains or mends gaps between policies, services and professionals – as well as service users. Gaps always exist in a context.*

Gaps can develop and be maintained because of prejudices based on social work's categorisation of people, because of language barriers, because of institutional hierarchies and their roles we have created for people within them. They can also exist because of lack of knowledge. Contextual knowledge is therefore essential in gap -mending reflections, as well as a good understanding of existing gaps".

(Askheim, Beresford and Heule, 2016, p.2).

The authors of this article have been previously introduced (Ch.1) as the co-founders of PowerUs. In this article the opportunities for developing Mend the Gap in the UK were clearly acknowledged:

'..*Developments have taken place which have had an impact on user involvement in UK social work education...building on the activities and experience gained by PowerUs, courses based on the Scandinavian model have also begun to emerge in Britain….what has been especially interesting about the Durham course is that it has broken new ground, involving mothers whose involvement with the social work service has related to child care and child protection issues*.' (Askheim et al, ibid p.9).

Notably there is an interchange between the titles 'Mend the Gap' and 'Gap Mending'. 'Mend the Gap' was applied by participants of the first project identified in the quote above. It has been accepted by subsequent projects as a more straightforward title to reflect what participants were seeking to achieve. As a starting point, having introduced 'Mend the Gap' in Northeast England, I could see the potential to develop the method by taking a PAR approach, thus diversifying and strengthening the research base.

i.   Definition of Action Research:

"*A participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities*'" (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p. 1).

This quote clearly compares with the definition of 'gap mending'. It is my contention that the Mend the Gap approach and gap mending concept, which is rooted in the international network PowerUs, has emerged within a significant period. As informed by the background to the research context in the chapter two, this is developing at a time when legislation is requiring practice that incorporates co-production. My research demonstrates that education is not preparing practitioners for this. Defining PAR further, McTaggart states:

"The aim of participatory action research is to change practices, social structures and social media which maintain irrationality, injustice, and unsatisfying forms of existence". (McTaggart in Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p.1)

I think the added emphasis on social media enhances definitions to reflect the contemporary nature of oppression that people encounter. These issues are important gaps to explore towards identifying solutions for promoting social and political transformation.

A further component of Mend the Gap is co-production. The concept of co-production is the subject of wide and varied interpretation which Needham and Carr (2009) have distinguished at three levels: lowest, intermediate and transformative. The final level is most effective and underpins the concept of Mend the Gap which places an emphasis on transformative practice.

ii. Definition of Co-production:

"The transformative level of co-production requires a relocation of power and control through the development of new user - led mechanisms of planning, delivery management and governance. It involves new structures of delivery to entrench co-production, rather than simply ad-hoc opportunities for collaboration and brings service users and practitioners together in new ways." (Needham and Carr, 2009, p.6).

I have selected the definition of co-production that is most meaningful. As Needham and Carr, (2009), highlighted, the lower-level definitions they identify amount to tokenism and no change. They present a framework of co-production at three levels, starting with a 'descriptive' level whereby at the 'least transformative level... this approach simply restates existing approaches to public services as co-productive'. The next 'intermediate' level ...' can be a tool of recognition for the people who use services and their carers, there is a danger that it can be a device to legitimise existing approaches, helping the people who use

services better to understand the strains that providers face, rather than changing organisational cultures and improving service provision.' The final 'transformative level' they acknowledge and which is defined earlier is, 'a challenge to realise' (ibid, pp.5 - 6). My own experience of introducing 'Mend the Gap' was that it provided a structure that could deliver the aims of action research and co-production with tangible measurable outcomes so that participants experienced change:

' *As the title suggests, the gap-mending concept has been developed as a reflective tool for mending the gaps between the declared goals of social work as, for example, stated in IASSW and IFSW-definition and between policies, services, professionals and service users. The aim is to renew social work in a transformative way, consistent with its declared goals*.' (Askheim et al, ibid).

The concept of 'gap mending' as a reflective tool, is not a tightly defined model or method. Hence, I felt there was an opportunity to develop the approach further by introducing the first participatory research-based Mend the Gap projects. I suggest that no approach is without critics. Perhaps it is a hallmark of success to be so established as to be criticised. I shall see this in a more positive light if my own work is critiqued in future. One critique that resonates with my study has been highlighted by Cornwall and Jewkes (1995):

"*Participatory research is a source of considerable contention. Whilst some proclaim it as a universal panacea for the problems besetting conventional practice, others judge it biased, impressionistic and unreliable. Participatory research often becomes embroiled in the unproductive debate surrounding the qualitative-quantitative divide, with critics regarding its methods as "soft*".' (1995, p.1667)

It is interesting to examine this debate twenty-five years on. I have experienced defending 'soft' outcomes such as increased confidence, empathy, and trust, from Mend the Gap projects, which I consider to be characteristics that are necessary to changing culture, co-creating new knowledge and resources. This is illustrated in the next chapter (four) where outcomes are identified.

Further distinctions are made between types of participatory research. Community based participatory research (CBPR) is deemed to go further to 'promote knowledge exchange within and between communities, Universities and other research, policy-making or service

delivery institutions' (Banks, Armstrong et al 2013, p 264). These authors distinguish PAR participants as subjects who are members of pre-existing communities, although this is not a defining characteristic. Whereas CBPR participants share a stronger community identity and active involvement of community stakeholders. As the authors acknowledge, the considerable overlap between PAR and CBPR does not warrant further distinction for the purposes of my research. What is most important is the value base and commitment to sharing power, resources and learning informed by action. Together, this leads to beneficial outcomes for all participants which underpins the Mend the Gap approach. In this respect I can see the potential for Mend the Gap to develop as CBPR without getting into more depth than making an observation at this stage. Banks, Herrington and Carter (2017) comment on how a,

 "*diverse range of actors works together in a process sometimes characterised as 'co-production' or 'co-creation'. Hence, as an integral part of the research process, impact is also co-produced*". (p.542).

They have introduced the concept of 'Co-impact' to reflect the way in which change is initiated by all parties working together:

 "*The concept of co-impact characterises the complex and dynamic process of social and economic change generated by participatory action research. This is in opposition to a more conventional dominant research models which are based on a donor-recipient model occurring at the end of a project following take -up and use of findings* "(ibid, 2017, p.451).

They distinguish between different types of impact that may be generated through PAR, acknowledging the conceptual differences which in practice overlap. These are:

- 'Participatory impact', which is process based whereby researcher and participants learn together. This can lead to changes in thinking, emotions, confidence new skills, insight and understanding, also feeling empowered.
- 'Collaborative impact', which is more findings based than the previous concept as it uses the findings generated by collaborative research to change policy and practice, attitudes and culture.

- 'Collective impact', which is driven by the research partners to achieve specific outcomes that influence policy and practice highlighted by the research. (Banks, Herrington and Carter ibid, pp. 553-554)

I consider the co-impact stage of Mend the Gap projects incorporates each of these stages which are helpful to recognising how impact is achieved. Through the research process, participants identified an agenda for change which was pursued through reflecting throughout on the learning process. The research findings and specific aim to promoted change were used collaboratively and collectively to influence accommodation policy and practice leading to improved support. This is outlined in chapter four where the research findings and key features of a Mend the Gap approach are brought to life. The framework of the Mend the Gap approach is important to establish in this chapter in relation to the research design. The second method for extending wider opportunities for participants to share their experiences is next introduced. This will conclude the overview of research methods. The detail of how they were applied are described later, in section two of this chapter.

3.6.1 Focus Groups

Focus groups have been straight forwardly defined as:

'A group of people who have been brought together to discuss a particular subject to solve a problem or suggest ideas' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021).

Focus groups have been widely used within social sciences as a qualitative method of data collection (Parker and Jonathon, 2006). The origins of focus groups began with commercial market research in the 1940's under the leadership of Paul Lazarsfeld at Columbia University (Bloor et al 2002), since when they have been traditionally used by market researchers and academic researchers (Morgan 1997, Kitzinger 1995). Kitzinger has identified the advantages of the dynamic nature of focus group encounters that highlight the similarities as well as differences between participants, which provides opportunities for participants to reflect on each other's ideas. Further, the conflict between participant's ideas can be used to explore underlying assumptions and theoretical frameworks. (Kitzinger, 1994). As a starting point for transformative action, focus groups are central to participatory

group work processes (Chiu, 2003, Farinosi et al, 2019). Notably, Bloor, Frankland Thomas and Robson (2001) who are key proponents of focus groups, are supportive of the invaluable breadth of learning with the participants' thoughts complementing the originality of researcher's own thinking. Yet, they are critical of a what they describe as a 'counter cultural' approach that 'performs a valuable function in reporting so called 'silenced voices of patients, clients, threatened local communities, workers ethnic minorities and the like' (ibid, p.95). This I hasten to suggest, is one of several choices of phrases that could be perceived as disparaging in respect of participatory action research. They caution that 'focus groups are not the Voice of The People, any more than history is the History of the Oppressed'. In their view, there is a danger of focus group findings being viewed as somehow 'the direct, untrammelled and transparent reporting of our inner nature' (Bloor et al, 2001 p. 94). They specifically challenge PAR :

"*This supposed emancipatory role for focus group research, sometimes called Participatory Action Research*" to conclude that, "*there are no reports of this transformative activity extending in time and space beyond the focus group itself, and it is therefore unclear how far such focus groups may be emancipatory rather than merely cathartic*". (Bloor et al, 2001, p.95).

I suggest considerable progress has been made since Bloor et al came to this conclusion as increasingly researchers have sought to promote an emancipatory research paradigm, incorporating focus groups to co- create knowledge with marginalised participants. (Fallon and Brown, 2002, Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2005, Allen 2006, Banks et al 2017, Rodriguez et al, 2018). It was essential that the benefits to participants were at the fore of my research design and that the process was constructive with enabling new insights, also that I maintained a reflexive awareness of my role as researcher.

The way in which the focus groups were implemented, and my positioning in adopting a rigorous and transparent approach by adhering to thematic analysis method and incorporating key principles in validating qualitative research, are reported in the next section. By bringing both research methods together, my aim has consistently been to promote the underpinning methodology which respects the diversity and complexity of human experience in an interactive context with others.

3.3. Section two.

3.3.1 Research Design

To explore the impact of service user involvement in social work education, I designed a two-stage study involving sixty-three participants in three participatory research projects and forty-one participants in five focus groups. Further details of participants, group profiles and key features of the methods used follow shortly. The aim of undertaking qualitative research is to focus in depth on a particular issue to find a depth of meaning and rich data as evidence of the problem participant's experience, and proposed solutions. An outcome focussed definition provided by Nkwi et al (2001) opens thinking about the wide variety of ways data that can be collected and the diversity of theoretical and epistemological approaches it can be based upon:

"Qualitative research involves any research that uses data that do not indicate ordinal values". (Nkwi et al, 2002, p.1)

Sample size for research is a subject of wide debate, with little agreement on numbers. Fugard and Potts (2015) have cut through this discourse, concluding that guidance provided on such wide-ranging numbers in relation to types of study has produced 'no evidence to justify how estimates have been arrived at' (p. 670). What is more commonly agreed is that there is a point at which saturation of data is reached. Braun and Clarke (2013) produced guidelines in relation to thematic analysis suggesting that enough data is needed to demonstrate patterns, whilst ensuring there is not too much data to manage. This reflects Sandelowski's view that the sample size should be 'small enough to manage the material and large enough to provide a new and richly textured understanding of experience (1995, p.183). On reflection, I can see how overly ambitious I was with seeking more than twice as many focus groups than I achieved. The overall numbers were manageable, generating rich and diverse data to support the prevalence of a range of themes and establish a firm evidence base for my research. I shall now explain how I undertook the study.

3.3.2 Geography

Three Mend the Gap projects took place over a twelve-month period, each project lasting eight weeks, meeting weekly for four to five hours. As I will shortly explain, they were supported with funding from the Northeast Social Work Alliance Teaching Partnership (NESWA). The projects were located in the Northeast of England where I am based. Two of the Mend the Gap projects were in a university in the community where asylum seeker participants are based. The third was based in the county council offices in the community where other participants lived.

Focus groups were conducted more extensively across the UK including three in England and one each in Scotland and Wales. Venues included three universities, one service user led organisation and one social services department. Each focus group lasted approximately one and a half hours. The shortest was one hour with social workers who kindly forfeited their lunch break. These locations were included to capture the wide-ranging ways in which different nations involved service users and carers and share ideas and practice. Unfortunately, lack of funds meant I did not extend travel to Ireland where I know there has been a lot of creative and constructive work undertaken with service users in social work education and research (Tanner et al, 2017).

3.3.3 Research Participants

Research participants were identified and recruited for the study on the basis of experience of the involvement of service users and carers in social work education. This included being directly involved as contributors, learning from such involvement as students and subsequently as qualified practitioners. Also included were educators who had a role/responsibility for supporting involvement.

There were 63 participants in the Mend the Gap programmes, all based in Northeast England from age 16 to 60's . Although age profiles were not specifically gathered, the intention was to include young people and adults to reflect diverse adults and children's contexts for social work. Participants included unaccompanied asylum - seeking young people (age 16-17), single parent asylum seekers (of children under five), disabled adults

with mental health difficulties, social work students and practitioners. In addition, two project managers one from IPC and one from NESWA.

Below is a summary of participant profiles. I have specifically identified the country of origin for asylum seeker participants. This is to provide information about the range of nationalities within both projects. It is also to respect the pride with which people wanted their heritage to be known of and celebrated.

Table one: Participant profiles:

Mend the Gap Participants	Sex	Country of origin/Ethnicity
Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking young people.	14 M	Eritrea 3 Iran 3 Iraq 2 Ethiopia 2 Kurdistan 4
Asylum seeking parents.	13 F 1 M	Syria 2 Nigeria 3 Papa New Guinea 1 Eritrea 4 Ethiopia 4
Disabled adults with mental health difficulties.	4 M 4 F	All white.
Social Work Students	16 F 4 M	17 White 1 Nigeria 1 Zimbabwe 1 South Africa
Practitioners	5 F	4 White 1 Nigeria
Project managers	1 M 1 F	1 White 1 Eritrea

Table two
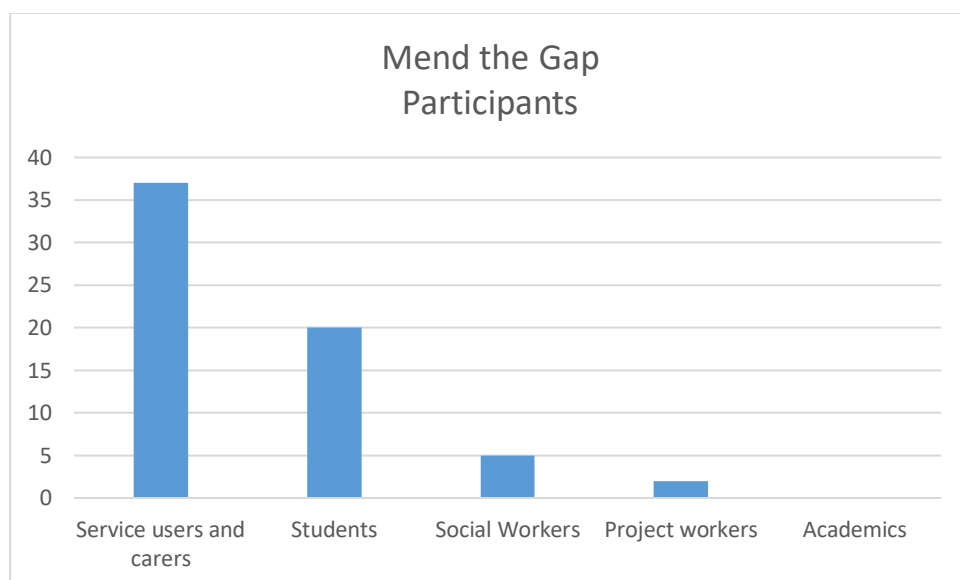
Participants for Mend the Gap projects were identified by service user led organisations that were supporting individuals experiencing barriers in relation to their engagement with professionals. Whilst confidentiality of all participants is maintained in accordance with research ethics (shortly to be explored), both service user led organisations wished to be identified as key contributors to the research process .I propose it is a feature of co-impact to recognise contributing organisations within PhD research.

Investing in People and Culture (IPC) is a charitable organisation based in Teesside supporting the asylum seeker and refugee community. I had previously co-facilitated a Mend the Gap programme with the project manager with parent refugees (as introduced in chapter one) which promoted awareness of the opportunities of this approach with the local migration partnership, social services and NESWA. This provided useful background to developing this project and as such, served as a pilot for this study. I will never forget the first day we all came together for the introductory session when the front-page news headlines in The Times was 'Apartheid on Streets of Britain' (Norfolk, 2016). This covered the story that G4S the global security group who managed asylum seeker accommodation in the Northeast for the Home Office and the local multi -million sub -contractor for housing provision, had painted asylum seeker house doors red. This made people's homes easy to

identify and many people were subjected to violence, harassment and abuse. It was compared to 'yellow stars that Jews were forced to wear in Nazi Germany' (ibid p.1). People whose houses this referred to were sitting in the room. The IPC manager explained how their doors had to be re-painted which led to a jubilant roar of relief and recognition of the importance and value of how collective voice can make a difference. This was a very positive start to our project and turned out to be key to the outcomes of the second Mend the Gap project with asylum seeker single parents conducted within my research. The first project marked the beginnings of discussions and ideas about how best to mend the gaps, support the growing number of unaccompanied minors and single asylum seeker parents in the region, and improve training and cultural awareness for social workers. IPC identified young people and parents to participate in the research project by inviting those interested to an informal information session about the programmes. I invited students and practitioners by sending out invitations and an information sheet via e- mail through NESWA (Appendix one).

Most participants were unknown to me. However, having worked in social work education for fifteen years, I did have a connection with some participants in my professional educator role. Reviewing my positionality at this stage involved confronting the impact of my identity, first and foremost as a white researcher with many black research participants. As introduced earlier, being culturally responsive incorporates having a theoretical perspective of critical race theory which Milner (2007) warns:

".. *is necessary for researchers to consider dangers seen, unseen and unforeseen which can emerge when they do not pay careful attention to their own and others racialized and cultural systems of coming to know*".(p.388)

I first became aware of my white privilege as a young adult backpacking around India. I was invited to have tea with a local historian I met on a guided walk. I had not anticipated the grandeur of the hotel entrance where we met, feeling self-conscious in my crumpled travel wear when my companion was dressed in a suit. I commented that I might escape notice if I walked alongside him. 'Oh no' he replied, explaining that I could wear absolutely anything, the only reason he would be admitted in such a venue was because I was accompanying him. In his own village where he had taught history in the local school for many years, he could only have tea in the posh hotel if accompanied by a white person.

I became aware of other privileges during my travels, not least having the means to travel to a country where high numbers of people were dying every day due to poverty and malnourishment. In the research context working with migrant participants who had to flee their home countries and live with poverty and inadequate food (Jolly, 2018), I was very aware of class privilege. Returning to the comfort of the home I owned after talking with women who lived in unsuitable accommodation, caring for my teenage children of the same age as young migrants who were without an adult guide, highlighted this. Being critically self - aware brought many privileges to the fore of my role as researcher, enabling me to utilise my awareness to challenge oppressive systems and attitudes. Reflecting upon my position from a feminist perspective that is aligned with participatory approaches as Jenkins et al (20219) succinctly state;

"..*opens up the possibility of developing research that responds to, and emerges from, the needs of marginalised groups and communities, involving them in conceiving and undertaking research that they and their allies can deploy to effect meaningful change on the ground*" (p.416).

This involved sharing ideas and decisions from the outset which began with having the right support. Interpreters supported unaccompanied minors and were not counted as participants. Involving interpreters involved a range of considerations. In the first instance, cost is often considered a factor and even a barrier. However, young people are entitled to have interpreter support which had already been established prior to the projects starting (In accordance with the 'United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child' (1989, articles 12 and 13). There were three interpreters supporting those from Kurdistan, Iraq and Iran. The interpreters learned about the research project, its aims and objectives with young people at the first meeting. They explained they had supported young people in education meetings, assessment and review meetings with social workers.

I was mindful that the presence of interpreters could raise ethical issues, particularly in the context where a young person may want to make a disclosure which they could have been reluctant to do with an interpreter. As young people were building trust with social workers, I considered that trust may have been a potential barrier with interpreters. I was concerned that the key principle of ensuring that power was located with young people by meeting with them in the first instance to identify problems in their experiences of social workers,

could have been misunderstood by interpreters. At the same time, I was mindful of feminist research which has argued for a social constructionist approach to translator involvement, whereby 'translators are viewed as active producers of knowledge' (Temple, 2002 in Berman and Tyyska, 2011).

We explored how best to involve translators whilst they maintained the professional boundaries of their role. Translators felt it was important that they' took a back seat', whereby first and foremost they were supporting young people. However, within the first meeting when everyone introduced themselves, they provided a summary of their own background which helped to build a warm environment. In fact, the positive rapport that was clearly established between interpreters and young people brought an additional beneficial dimension to group work arrangements. At appropriate intervals interpreters occasionally contributed their experiences of being in their role with young people. For example, they explained how shocked they were at sometimes being asked for their views on a young person. Most common was being asked what age they thought the young person was. Interpreters often had to explain their role and boundaries in responding to such inappropriate information requests based on their opinions. It was notable over the eight-week period that young people's English did improve. Interpreters encouraged young people to speak for themselves wherever possible which is evident on the recorded evaluation undertaken for the project (appendix four). Interpreters agreed to the same commitments to maintain confidentiality and consent to be involved in supporting the recorded evaluation, signing research consent forms along with everyone else.

With the parent project, the single male parent participant spoke fluent English as did most women. Two women participants had support with translation from one participant who spoke their language and dialect. The option of independent interpreters was made but these women said they felt most comfortable with someone they already had an established and supportive relationship with. They had experience of independent interpreter support with legal cases and felt a friendlier environment would be established with people they knew. The feminist research cautions against assuming that translators who share a language with research participants share their culture (Berman and Tyyska, 2011, p.184). In this context the women shared their culture which was an important factor. A key message that came from the research was the stereotypical way in which

parents felt they were treated as a homogeneous group of 'asylum seekers'. The diversity of ethnicity within the group was a strength of the research. It provided rich data about the different cultures and identified how gaps that could be mended with better understanding and appreciation of them.

The role of translator involvement warrants further consideration in cross cultural qualitative research. In future research I would address the same question about how to involve translators though I may get a different response. Berman and Tyyska, ibid, wrestle with appropriate terminology for translator participation e.g., 'community researcher', ' bi-cultural translator',' cultural broker', ' key informant', 'interpretive guide'. These considerations highlight tensions with social status and perceived role (p.184). In my view, the balance achieved with translator support in the projects worked well however, Berrman and Tyyask's request for research to make the role of interpreters visible (ibid, p.187) requires critical examination in my future research role.

Empowerment Consultancy and Training (ETC) was a newly established organisation based in Gateshead. It is run by disabled people for disabled people. I had worked with one of the two project directors previously who had longstanding involvement teaching about the social model of disability on the social work course on which I lectured. Reviewing my positionality at the outset of co-designing a project with disabled adults brought to the fore my privilege as an able-bodied person. Guided by Banks et al (2013), being critically self-aware of this privilege enabled me to connect my own lived experience to larger systemic realities which disabled people often felt excluded from. This was the main reason why the organisation developed, due to the increased isolation disabled people were experiencing as a result of austerity, resulting in cuts to resources and services. This had negatively impacted upon people's mental health and an informal network formed, calling itself 'The Great Escape' to help people get out of the house more. I met with some participants of this group which led to making a short film for the Social Policy Association Conference (Durham University, 2017). I was shocked to discover that some people participating in this film were meeting with other people outside of the house, for the first time in over a year. To build on the focus to increase understanding of people's experiences and promote their wellbeing, I was invited to meet with the group to discuss how a Mend the Gap approach could help with this. From there, disabled participants keen to establish a new programme were

identified. As before, students and practitioners were invited to join via NESWA (Appendix one).

Personal assistants (PA's) supported two participants and were not counted as participants themselves. As with interpreters, they were invited to introduce themselves within the group, which they expressed 'made a nice change'. PA's are more often ignored as if they are invisible, being there only to assist the person who is the invited group member. It feels to me to go against the principles of establishing a warm environment built on human connection when a few people because of their independent roles are excluded from being welcomed. One participant who experienced memory loss found her support person to be most helpful with recalling certain experiences she wanted to share. PA's like interpreters gave formal consent to agree to codes of confidentiality and data collection. For clarity, the five signed consent forms from interpreters and PA's were not counted within the total number of research participants.

There were **forty-one participants in focus groups** who were sought by sending invitations to universities that I was aware of having social work programmes or that colleagues recommended to me. As previously explained, I wanted to widen the scope for participation in focus groups beyond the Northeast region. Having worked in the Northeast as a social worker and lecturer and introducing Mend the Gap, it felt very important to meet people whose experiences I had no knowledge of.

I sent letters of invitations to social work programme course leads (appendix one), to fourteen universities in total. I also sent invitations to three local authorities to invite qualified social workers to participate and contacted four service user led organisations, two supporting adult service users, one supporting adult carers and one working directly with children and young people. Invitations returned a mixed response ranging from no response through to some interest and considerable enthusiasm. I am mindful of the pressures upon organisations to pursue interests beyond the immediate priorities of day-to-day management. When I did not receive a response after a second reminder whereby, I asked if there was another contact person I could approach, I accepted that most likely whoever received this could have been too busy to respond. On reflection, I could have casted my net wider by contacting more local authorities and service user led agencies.

Some university academic leads raised the issue of funding, which could have enabled participation if in place, to cover the costs of people's time and expenses to participate in a focus group or prevent the possibility if no funding was available. This was explained to me based on previously established principles for involvement. This was understandable, as much progress has been made to value and recognise participants' involvement in research and social work education (SCIE, 2009, Beresford, 2016). However, this did raise a barrier for me as I had no research budget whatsoever. This gave me the idea to promote a 'fair-trade' solution. As interest has begun to grow in the Mend the Gap approach, I offered to deliver a presentation/workshop in exchange for people's time to join a focus group. All universities who accepted were happy with this offer of exchange. I am delighted to say that the sessions I ran resulted in some significant student interest to join a Mend the Gap project, so it was worthwhile. I like to think of the combination of offering Mend the Gap workshops in exchange for a focus group as a 'fair trade methodology' which I hope may catch on as a useful concept to other researchers.

In total, five focus groups took place in three universities between Wales, Scotland and London, with one focus group each in a service user led organisation and social services department in Northeast England. In summary:

- Three of the groups held in universities included service users and academics, no students or qualified social workers
- One community-based organisation where social work students undertook placements included service users and students (no qualified social workers)
- One local authority-based service included all qualified social workers, (no students or service users).

Below is a summary of participant's profiles.

Table three.

Focus Group Participants	Sex	Ethnicity	Region/location
Group one	4 F 2M	3 Black 3 White	London

Group two	6F	9 White	
	4F	1 Black	Wales
Group three	8F	12 White	
	4 M		Scotland
Group Four	3 F	2 Black	
	5 M	6 White	Northeast
Group Five	4 F	5 White	
	1 M		Northeast

Table four.
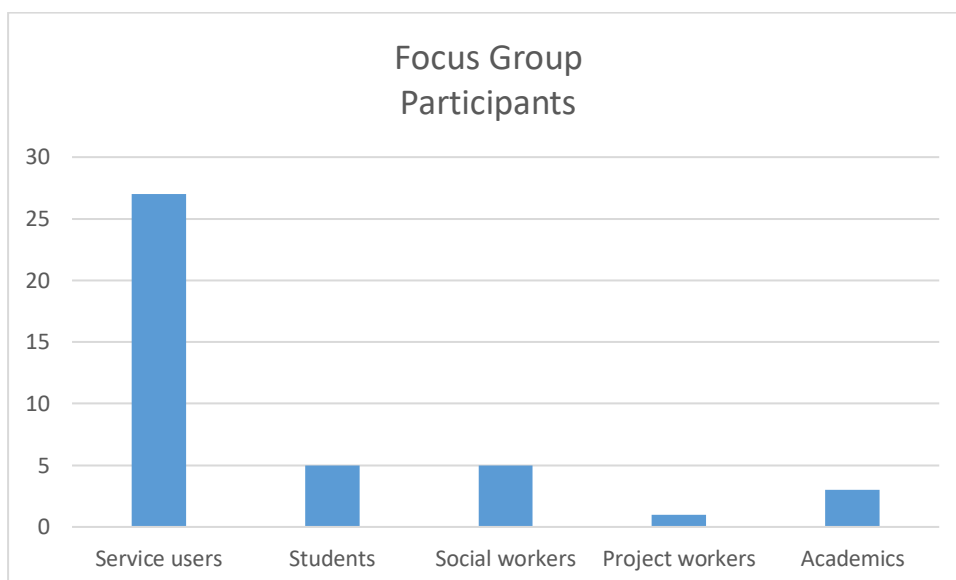
One reason, previously stated, for undertaking focus groups across the UK was to meet people beyond the Northeast region with which I was most familiar. When I got to Scotland, London and Wales, I discovered there was one participant in each group who I had met previously at social work events. It was nice to make a familiar connection but overall, I experienced meeting people for the purposes of my research, for the first time. I shall now address funding as a core consideration for inviting people to participate in research.

3.3.4 Funding.

As explained in the introduction, as a requirement of social work education, service user involvement is financially supported by a Department of Health (DofH) grant. Unfortunately, this grant was removed in Scotland in 2009, although service user involvement has remained strong, as I discovered with the biggest focus group I conducted there. Service users and carers in Scotland explained how they felt their involvement was more important than funding. This was interesting, having experienced rejection by some academics on the grounds of having no funding. This demonstrated to me that service users should be given the choice to participate. As it was, universities who participated covered costs for people's time and expenses to participate in focus groups, stating that they welcomed the opportunity to explore the impact of involvement. The research question that had been commonly raised by services user and carers I had worked with, was widely shared as 'a really important question'.

The participatory research projects also required funding for time and expenses and in addition interpreter support costs. It was most fortunate that these costs were met by NESWA, who were very keen to support research, educational and professional developments in the region in such progressive and innovative ways. Implications for funding to sustain involvement, will be discussed in chapter five.

It is important to clarify how participation was remunerated within the research and to make it clear that I was not involved in payment arrangements directly with participants. The issue of participation being voluntary and free from coercion is explained by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC):

'*Payment should not override the principles of freely given and fully informed consent. Participants should know before they start the research that they can withdraw from the study without losing their payment*'. (ESRC, 2020)

The issue of payment for participation in research has been the subject of longstanding ethical debate which does not need to be recounted here but is important to identify. Researchers have argued that 'characterising payment for research as coercive is misguided, because offers of benefit cannot constitute coercion' (Wertheimer and Miller, 2007). Research ethics guidelines have clarified that it is acceptable to pay participants for

expenses and time (e.g., Council of Europe, 2010 and National Institute for Health, 2009). However, debate has continued to evoke disagreement and controversy over forms of payment. (Head, 2009, Hovland, 2016).

In line with the established principles in social work education, to offer payment that values people's time, debate has been guided but not without controversy. Although payment can be made to people for their time as well as expenses, there are complications relating to the impact of payments to people in receipt of benefits (SCIE, 2009). In the case of asylum seekers who are not entitled to receive payment for voluntary activities – nor paid employment or entitlement to public funds- no financial rewards could be made. Funding support did cover costs for refreshments and lunch which became an important break in the day between activities. Thankfully, debate around rewarding participants does not seem to have extended to whether a biscuit or sandwich is more appropriate.

Further consideration of ethical dimensions of the study will be made by establishing ethical approval processes then examining key principles of rigour and transparency.

3.3.5 Ethical considerations and approval processes.

Ethical approval was granted by Durham University Sociology Department. By adhering to the University ethical policy and framework I took responsibility for ensuring that the design and conduct of my work was ethically robust. I was clear about my role and responsibilities as researcher, my supervisors as principal investigators and the head of Department, as set out in the Research Integrity policy and practice. (Durham University, 2017). I found 'the Research Integrity Checklist for Researchers ' (ibid) , useful to ensure key points of good practice were thoroughly addressed, before, during and when completing the research. This guidance helped me to appreciate the ongoing process for maintaining ethical responsibility. It underpinned for me the importance of reflexivity to maintain focus on ethical considerations throughout the study. Anticipating risks at the outset was the first step in establishing responsibility for protecting participants. The potential for risks to participants could change as the research evolved, thus I regularly reviewed and anticipated possible new ethical considerations. I made provision within the ethical consent forms and

in discussion for participants to clarify aspects of the research process and purpose at various stages.

The ESRC Framework for Research Ethics (2010) provided further guidance. The six key principles the framework is based on are reflected in the University policy. Most helpful was the guidance around analysing risk, confidentiality, consent, and data collection .These key ethical considerations apply to all methods of social research (Holman, 1991).

Parveen (2017) explains how researchers have to take the sole responsibility for the ethical conduct of their own research; 'first and the foremost responsibility of a researcher is to take care of the safety, dignity, rights and well-being of the participants…. researchers have to take care of participants' rights and must consider their research from participants' perspective ' (p.2). I consider this is the central tenet of research ethics.

From the outset of inviting participants to meeting them I had to ensure that full information was provided about the purpose and use of participants' contributions (appendices one and two). Confidentiality and consent were addressed to ensure that everyone was clear about respecting confidentiality within the group discussion which helped to establish a participatory approach from the outset (appendix two). In taking responsibility for the ethics of the research I was careful to point out that confidentiality is a shared responsibility, for everyone involved in the research to maintain. Nonetheless, I held the utmost responsibility for ensuring that confidentiality was respected.

Key issues addressed to establish a positive ethical environment are summarised below:

"**Consent** may be seen as having four essential elements: disclosure (the adequacy of the information given by the researcher); comprehension (the extent to which this information is understood by the participant); competence (the participant's cognitive or emotional capacity to give or withhold agreement); and voluntariness (the absence of inducement of coercion). Fulfilment of each of these elements is necessary for informed consent to carry its intended moral force" (Sim ,2010 in Sim and Waterfield, 2019, p.3004).

This was critical for me to consider due to the diversity and vulnerabilities of participants. For example, some participants in focus groups had learning difficulties or mental health problems. Within Mend the Gap projects many participants did not have English as a first language. To ensure autonomy in the process I was very conscious of how I was explaining

information, pace used during the discussion, checking understanding and ensuring where required people had the right support. Participants were given an information sheet providing information about the research process (appendix one) and were asked to complete a consent form (appendix two) which was filed securely. It was pointed out to me by some participants with learning disabilities in one focus group that I could have asked them to produce my information in a more accessible format. This was a really important point and one that is taken forward in the discussion chapter (five). I took responsibility as facilitator to ensure everyone had the opportunity to express their views. The option to revoke consent and withdraw from the study at any time was explained. As no one did this I managed to avoid potential complexities of the removal of individual data that Sim and Waterfield highlight as a conflict of participatory discussion group interests (ibid, p. 3005).

Confidentiality and anonymity are often treated synonymously. There are, however, important distinctions that can be drawn between these two concepts, and the related notion of privacy. Confidentiality relates to what is done with information once it is in the researcher's possession, and specifically the extent to which it is disclosed to others. Anonymity, in contrast, is concerned with the attribution of information—can individuals be identified from the data that they provide or from other information relating to them? (Sim and Waterfield, ibid, p.3005). I was careful to explain the how information would be stored and used particularly with the additional factor of recording and transcribing discussions. (The subjects of data collection and transcribing are addressed later in this section). Privacy was addressed prior to confidentiality and anonymity, as it was concerned with access to information rather than storage and use of information. The 'Points to Consider When planning Research' (Durham University, 2017) section was useful to highlight potential issues I may encounter as a researcher. The research participants very clearly fell within the category of 'vulnerable', (defined within university ethics policy as ; 'children/minors, prisoners, those with cognitive impairment or those in unequal relationships'). Except for prisoners (with whom I would welcome the opportunity to conduct a Mend the Gap project), all categories applied to some of my research participants. This led me to develop a strategy for dealing with issues that could have arisen with participants disclosing matters of concern.

I prioritised making clear my position on confidentiality in my role as researcher with ethical responsibility and as a registered social worker with a legal duty to report concerns. The principle of confidentiality was based on understanding that I was committed to follow up on any information shared during the research which caused concerns about a participant's or other person's safety. Considerations were made in relation to the ethics of care to ensure that people felt supported throughout their involvement. I made it clear that personal information would not be used. Interestingly the resounding main message about maintaining confidentiality and anonymity in qualitative research is not to identify anyone by name and where necessary apply a pseudonym to support this(Hennick, 2007, Crow and Wiles, 2008 ,Lincoln, 2009 in Sim and Waterfield, ibid). Yet participants I met with identified a sense of pride and feeling valued through being identified and associated with the research. I explained that written materials, audio recordings and transcripts would not identify anyone by name or any other personal details. Although Mend the Gap participants consented to co-producing a recorded evaluation and were happy to be identified by being on film, it was important to assure everyone that information I held was stored in a safe location.

People expressed their consent to be identified as participants in potential publications resulting from the research, which I felt was another aspect of co-impact, by ensuring that they did not completely lose ownership of their contributions. In seeking informed consent, I made it clear that people could identify themselves if they wished to be acknowledged, rather than by direct association to specific focus groups/or projects. In this respect their direct involvement connecting them with research data analysis, was protected and anonymous, however their contributions were recognised. Grunyer (2002) has challenged the accepted orthodoxy of guaranteeing anonymity resulting in a change of practice. She has described how participants did not feel happy with having pseudonyms applied to their experiences, particularly as these were being published. As one research participant stated:

"*I had been looking forward to the transcript of your article to share other's experiences, but without our real names I didn't feel part of it*" (Grunyer, 2002, p.3).

I think this raises interesting questions about ownership of data. One particularly beneficial outcome of my research was co-authoring four chapters with research participants which

meant they were able to identify themselves by name as authors. This is addressed later (in chapter five).

The make - up of groups is key to considering issues of confidentiality further. For example, where people know each other in the group this could increase the risk of people feeling concerned about confidentiality with sensitive data discussed outside of the group. Within participatory action research, as identified in section one, it is common for projects to be established through people coming together from the same organisation or community. As has been explained, by regularly re visiting confidentiality at different stages of the research process, trust was built enabling participants to talk about their experiences more freely. Bloor et al (2001,p.25) warn that within focus groups, people could divulge something they know of someone else that person does not want to be shared. Such cautious guidance accounts for the general recommendation that focus groups should be made of participants who do not know each other:

''*so that pre-existing relationships, and certain assumptions or expectations that these involve, do not influence disclosure* '(Morgan, 1997 in Sim and Waterfield, ibid, p.3009).

Whilst I can appreciate the arguments for this, particularly in the context of more personal discussion based topics, given that in all five focus groups most people had pre -existing relationships with new people welcomed, there was a strongly collaborative and supportive group approach to discussion. I suggest this is a mark of recognition of the way in which people have contributed to social work education through group approaches and support. I felt that from the start of each group, respect for mutual participation and shared views was strongly conveyed. To support the process further in respect of assuring confidentiality and anonymity and basically that participants were left feeling ok with the opportunity to ask anything further, clarify anything or talk about how they felt I followed recommended guidance for 'debriefing'. This involved summarising key issues with closing the discussion and staying in the room so that I was available to address individual participant's concerns (Bloor et al, 2001). This was minimised by anticipating potential risks of harm.

Risk of harm can come from a group context which creates a sense of public vulnerability which may expose participants to various forms of harm; 'thus, social or psychological harm

may arise through a breach of confidentiality and/or anonymity. Information that is disclosed may lead to embarrassment, shame, stigmatization, discrimination, disruption of existing social relationships, or adverse employment consequences, and in some cases, participants may face legal action as a result of information that is made public'. (Warwick, 1982 in Sim and Waterfield, 2019, p.3005). I endeavoured to anticipate potential harm as previously identified in accordance with university ethical processes. My main concern was that someone may disclose something that left them feeling distressed. For example, I was concerned at the end of a Mend the Gap dialogue about female genital mutilation (FGM) to speak with parents who had disclosed their personal experiences. One parent said it was the first time she had spoken about her experience. We had established counselling support through a local voluntary organisation if parents wished to access this. When I reminded parents of this, they responded with brimming smiles describing how 'brilliant' and liberating it felt to be able to talk about something so important. They offered to go into any classroom and educate students about FGM as it had 'felt great to be so open about it'. This was reflexive learning for me. I had been so concerned about the ethical implications of parents talking about traumatic experiences and potential risk of harm this presented, I had not anticipated the liberation of talking about difficult things for the first time. This conversation promoted empathy and discussion about the benefits of sharing difficult personal experiences. Further it demonstrated to me how feminist values challenged the marginalisation of women and empowered research participants (Jenkins et al, 2019 p.415).

I reflected in a similar way upon focus groups. I was careful to explain how someone could halt recording or leave the discussion if they felt the need to stop at any point. I did not rush off at the end of the discussions and ensured everyone had my contact details if they wanted to discuss anything about their experience in the group. I was careful to ensure that each group had key points of contact and support should any further links needed to be made. Whilst being pre-occupied with minimising the potential risk of harm, I found in accordance with Sim and Waterfield's' observation:

"*It is also important to note, however, that focus group discussions can provide a very supportive forum in which participants can express their emotions or anxieties, and thereby have a beneficial rather than a harmful effect*" (ibid, p.3012).

I feel that the rich qualitative data generated from the research demonstrates the benefits of participation and credibility of research methodology which the data analysis will shortly reveal. As a further measure to mitigate risk or harm throughout the research process, my contact details were included with the participant information and consent forms. Also, those of the lead PhD supervisor in case there were any additional information requirements or concerns regarding participation and ethical issues. I was keen to encourage people to get in touch if they wanted to ask anything about the subsequent stages of the research process and timings. I did receive a couple of updates in respect of taking forward some of the ideas that came out of discussion such as enabling service user access to the university library and developing evaluation methods for assessing the impact of involvement.

The interest generated from group discussions in the overall research findings will be discussed later as part of co-impact.

To summarise in this section, as researcher there were a wide range of ethical issues for me to consider. I was responsible for ensuring all ethical processes were met at each stage of the research process, which required me to consider my role and reflexivity in relation to research participants at regular intervals. I was reflexively aware of my relationship with participants and the imbalance of power which my role could present as researcher, registered social worker and educator.

Further key considerations to ensure the ethical robustness of the study are summarised below.

3.3.6 Rigour and Transparency of the Study

Rigour and transparency seem to me to be the cornerstone of qualitative research. Literature on this topic is vast (e.g., Seale, 1999, Tracey, 2010, Noble and Smith, 2015, Pelto, 2017). I have summarised the commonly agreed principles for ensuring the trustworthiness of the study that would satisfy the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985); credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

The 'trustworthiness' of qualitative content analysis is often presented in relation to these concepts (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, Shenton, 2004,). Elo et al (2014) clarify this further,

concluding that every phase of the analysis process should be scrutinised 'to give the reader a clear indication of the overall trustworthiness of the study' (p.8). Their framework has been widely accepted as rigorous by qualitative researchers in pursuit of a trustworthy study (Shenton, 2004, Silverman,2011).

The criteria are outlined below in relation to techniques which Lincoln and Guba identify for achieving this, demonstrating how I have scrutinised each phase of my study.

Credibility.

Triangulation.

Triangulation involves using more than one research method. It was introduced in the 1950's by Campbell and Fiske, as an alternative approach to 'the *single operationalism* dominant in psychology (1959, p.101) with the intent of overcoming 'intrinsic bias that comes from single method, single theory studies' (Denzin 1978). Denzin has strongly argued that triangulation raises sociologists above the 'personalistic biases that stem from single methodologies' (1978, p.294) and leads them to develop ideas that permit 'discovery and verification'. As introduced, my study involves triangulation as an approach to assessing the validity and reliability of data gathering. I chose Braun and Clark's (2006, 2019) six stage reflexive thematic analysis method as a robust analytical framework for identifying themes that respond to the research question.

Respondent Validation.

Respondent Validation, also known as 'member checks', is the process whereby research participants are invited to respond to the accuracy of the initial data gathered and the interpretations being made, (Bloor, 2002). There are mixed views amongst methodologists on the value of member checking. For example, an action research approach based upon co-constructing knowledge and participants' reflection sits outside of the member check/validating data processes (Christ, 2010).Torrance (2012) has summarised the literature on this topic and concludes it is 'an element of qualitative approach rather than a core issue for social research', highlighting how the latest handbook of mixed methods research (Tashakori and Teddlie, 2010) did not include any reference to this subject (2012, p.2). As there has not been a later edition of this text I have looked for 'member check's

and 'respondent validation' in the subject index through more recent texts in relation to my qualitative research and not found specific reference either. I suggest this could be a reflection of the growth of co-participatory approaches to research supporting one argument against respondent validation; that 'some participants may have more power than others to shape the collectivity's view of itself and the emergent research report' (Torrance, ibid, p.7). Fundamentally it does seem to be generally considered as good practice to invite comments from participants on data gathered and analysis (Nobel and Smith, 2015).

The validity of the data gathered within Mend the Gap programmes was achieved through producing notes from each session, clarifying interpretation and understanding and participants sharing their reflections and evaluations. Focus groups were recorded with transcripts produced verbatim to minimise the possibility of mis- interpretation which involved many iterations due to the diverse communication in groups. Moreover, thematic analysis method increased the rigour and transparency for validating data.

Confirmability.

Researcher reflexivity.

Reflexivity is the self - reflection of the researcher to account for personal bias that could influence research findings. Whyte (1948) is credited for introducing the concept by writing about how ethnographic research had been conducted (Silverman, 2011) where 'the self-aware analysis of the dynamics between researcher and participants…and the way in which the researchers' positioning impacts on the research process' is critical (ibid p.22). The origins of the concept were from ethnographic observation. The term 'reflexivity' has developed as an essential strategy within qualitative research to counter some of the common criticisms of researcher bias, (Pope and Mays, 1995).

As I have introduced myself in chapter one, I have a professional identity and personal experiences that inform the participatory world view stated in this chapter. I was aware as a lecturer in the region where most of the research was taking place, with professional, registered social worker status, that I needed to discuss my position as a researcher very clearly in relation to the co-facilitation of PAR projects and conducting focus groups. I addressed this by clearly explaining my role as a researcher in relation to the roles of

research participants. My professional training has equipped me with the skills required to create a supportive environment to enable participants to express themselves (Mclaughlin, 2007).

Reflexivity requires the researcher to go further to make the methodological processes transparent and open to scrutiny to strengthen the research findings. To ensure I was constantly attending to the impact I had on the study, I made field notes and recorded my reflective thoughts and observations after each focus group had taken place and following completion of each transcription. This proved to be key to improving my skills as a focus group facilitator. For example, reflecting upon focus group one I realise I had become drawn into the conversation and offered a contribution based upon what 'I think'. I cringed over this for some time as felt like I had committed the ultimate faux pas in focus group facilitation. I could see how I had become drawn in to the 'collective conversation' that focus groups have been defined as (Kamberilis and Dimitriadis, 2005). These authors emphasise the importance of undertaking research '*with* people not *on* them' , I learned from the first focus group that I needed to stay *with* the conversation rather than be immersed *in* it to ensure that everyone had the opportunity to say what they think , to observe and encourage interactions and to enable conveying empathy with participants' perspectives. With reflexivity integral to methodology the interaction between the researcher and participants is open to scrutiny. Some authors call for 'constant reflexivity' (Burawoy, 2003 and Taylor, 2002 in Silverman, 2011) with the interaction examined throughout to identify the influence the researcher has at each stage of the process (Frost, 2009). I sought to achieve this by producing verbatim transcripts from the focus group recordings and by using thematic analysis to ensure a rigorous and transparent approach to examining the data. Being reflexively aware throughout the research opened new insight into my own lived experiences which enabled me to envisage a new approach to the educational curriculum, involving a shakeup of current structures and systems.

Dependability.

Audit trail of decision making.

An audit trail is essentially a transparent account of the steps in a research project from beginning to end. Providing a clear audit of decisions, it allows the reader to study the information and come to their own conclusions on the quality of the study. I have made a clear audit trail of all decision making by clearly outlining all stages of the thesis structure, most significantly for making transparent data analysis decision making. By using reflexive thematic analysis method, careful decision making was made explicit to identify and justify selected themes. Highlighted notes from this process were shared with my supervisors to ensure minimising any risk of researcher bias. A peer researcher also identified themes from the focus group data, independent of my analysis which we agreed to ensure accurate interpretation of themes in line with good practice recommended for undertaking reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019). The presentation of the findings (chapter four), samples of transcripts (appendix three) and thematic analysis results (chapter four), make explicit and transparent the process for data collection and analysis.

Transferability.

Thick Description.

As all qualitative research is specific to a context, it is important to describe in enough detail the research process and participants' experiences to support the findings. As Mend the Gap is a relatively new concept within research, it has been especially important for me to detail the steps of how this approach works in relation to the research methods. I have also explained how the focus groups were organised and implemented in addition to how the data was analysed. It is generally accepted that adherence to adopting the key strategies outlined supports a rigorous research process (Maher, Hadfield and Hutchings, 2018).

In relation to all considerations made, consent forms and information sheets about each of the two studies were distributed to each participant. This included clarifying how information would be used, including participants rights to withdraw from the study, (Appendices one and two). Anonymity was explained to protect the identities of all participants. No individual is identified in the study and the names of participating universities removed to avoid any suggestion of scrutinising any particular social work course which was not my intention. At the request of two service user led organisations

who participated in the study, they are identified, strengthening the co-impact of the study. Data collection, recording and storage were explained in relation to secure storage and dissemination. As a further support to the process, the contact details for my principal supervisor were provided. Although no participant had any reason to follow this up, this was an important factor to ensure accountability and protection of participants.

These principles are related further in relation to the study and findings that follow with the next chapter.

Methods of data collection and data analysis are explained next, to outline how a triangulated approach strengthened the research design. Also, to demonstrate how the two methods were approached from different perspectives in connection to exploring the main research question. As Birley and Moreland (1998) have clarified,

"Triangulation is one way to improve validity, e.g., to examine the research topic or focus from a number of vantage points. This should, however, not blind the researcher to differences between sets of data that such different vantage points provide". (Birley and Moreland, 1998 in Holtzhausen, 2001 p.6).

Data Collection.

As has been explained, the origin of my research comes from my role facilitating and supporting involvement and introducing Mend the Gap as an innovative approach for co-producing learning and transformative outcomes within social work education. Rather than introduce a 'pilot study' for the purpose of initiating my research, I felt that that the Mend the Gap projects I had previously co facilitated (four in total), provided the insight needed to develop research methodology. Each project generated unique outcomes. Key features were established as a framework for promoting an equal learning environment, which are introduced shortly. Findings from these projects led to funding being achieved to develop the Mend the Gap approach in the region.

 Arguably, I could have conducted a pilot study to test the questions for the focus groups and to reflect on my role as researcher as I did after the first focus group. On playing back the discussion and recording the transcript, I felt I had engaged too much in conversation with one of the participants, which risked dominating the agenda. I concluded that my

learning from this was useful and did not detract from the quality of discussion and data generated. As found by Kezar (2000), the main purpose of conducting pilot studies is 'to obtain first hand 'real world' experience of the issue studied to enhance the research design, conceptualisation, interpretation of findings and ultimately the results' (p.1). I felt this fitted entirely with the dynamic and organic nature of the research study. Reflexivity was integral to improving research practice throughout. Further, I discussed and agreed this with my supervisors.

I shall now describe how data was collected in relation to two different research methods.

3.3.7 Data Collection

Mend the Gap

I am often asked for a written guide on conducting a 'Mend the Gap' project, which is an outcome I aim to co-produce with Mend the Gap participants following the completion of my thesis. Unlike the prison 'Inside Out' programme introduced in chapter one, it is not an approach whereby the content can be scripted. What defines a Mend the Gap project is the ethos base and key principles. The content is determined by the context and the gaps, i.e., the barriers or problems people encounter in their experiences of seeking or receiving support. A suggested framework for co-facilitating a project is presented which accounts for the way in which the three Mend the Gap projects were conducted. Further, I hope this will inspire others to replicate the approach in other educational/professional contexts.

Summary of key Features of a Mend the Gap approach.

- *Co facilitators identify interest with people with lived experiences experiencing common issues.*

As previously explained, this was identified with two organisations – Investing in People and Culture (IPC) and Empowerment Training and Consultancy (ECT).

- *The starting point for a project is that people with lived experiences identify the gaps that exist between themselves and those in professional support roles (students and practitioners).*

The first meetings were co-facilitated by me and a project manager, one with unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, one with asylum seeker parents of children

under five and one with disabled adults with mental health difficulties. Applying key principles of the Mend the Gap approach as PAR approach, was a new development specific to this research which enhanced the key principles of promoting an equal learning environment. Explaining PAR brought choices and decision making to the fore, such as where to locate the projects and agreeing levels of responsibility. For example, young people preferred the project was based at the local university which presented new and inspirational opportunities for them to experience a higher education environment. Making the first choice about project location was an important first step to experiencing that they could express their views which could be supported. Three parents put themselves forward as co-facilitators along with me and the IPC project manager. It was explained that all parents did not feel confident to take an equal facilitator role. This presented a new opportunity for three parents to take on the roles of co-facilitators within the group and promote equal participation of other parents. Having this flexibility in approach was important to enable people to feel comfortable to attend on their own terms. Disabled adults agreed at each session how to share tasks enabling all participants to facilitate dialogue, record and feedback during the project.

- *Students and practitioners are invited to join the programme, reflect upon the gaps presented and identify their own, i.e., the difficulties they encounter from their professional support roles. (Important to emphasise that people who traditionally feel most excluded set the agenda). Gaps become themes for weekly dialogue.*

Everyone came together for an introductory meeting which was the second meeting for participants who had identified the gaps from their experiences. The principles of Mend the Gap and PAR were explained, with student and practitioner participants agreeing to sharing responsibility. This was most evident with offering to seek information outside of the sessions to inform further dialogue and with co-delivering presentations on key topics such as Children's Act legislation (1989, 2004), the Care Act (2014) and note taking.

The aim is to achieve a balance of numbers between participants to ensure that sessions are not dominated by those in professional roles. An ideal group size, based on previous Mend the Gap projects would be a maximum total group size of twenty. No group size was less than this, with a balance of numbers achieved in two projects. As young people could only

meet on Saturdays, this limited student and practitioner availability. The imbalance meant that twice as many young people attended than professionals.

- *Everyone commits to attend all sessions (as far as possible). Other people can be invited to join some of the dialogue e.g., social services managers, as they can be involved with mending gaps.*

Emphasis was placed on this, with information and invitations sent out to participants and during first two sessions.

- *Reflection is integrated and outcomes identified to enable changes and new ideas to be developed and implemented.*

Reflection was introduced and explained at the first two sessions. Participants were given folders with blank paper and pens to record their own reflections, taking note of key learning, how they felt, drawing or writing in their own language. At regular intervals, participants were invited to share reflections which was central to capturing learning. This approach informed evaluation strategies co-designed for each project.

I maintained my own reflective log and explained to participants how this helped with introducing some of my thoughts as researcher, particularly with posing reflective questions when a potentially discriminatory viewpoint was being shared. For example, there were heated discussions with parents about homosexuality which is illegal in participant's home countries. Reflecting together enabled different perspectives to be shared which some participants identified had changed their own inherited viewpoint as the first time they had been able to talk about this subject. Aligning other people's experiences of being stigmatised and persecuted with their own experiences of migration promoted different viewpoints and most significantly changed perspectives on people's own values. This was a significant transformative outcome for the project.

- *The first meeting where all participants come together establishes a space where people can make their own presentations of their lived experiences they may wish to share.*

An important part of establishing expectations was to make it clear that people were not expected to introduce themselves by describing their personal and difficult experiences. The significance of this space was that it was open to all, and new to participants as an equal

platform for getting to know each other. This was the starting point for building trust and relationships based on mutual respect for each other's experiences.

- *Programmes typically run for half a day or a full day weekly for eight weeks.*

Timings were agreed with participants to fit in with education for young people; Saturdays. Childcare arrangements with parents, from dropping off to collecting their children, babies were with them. With disabled adults a later start and finish worked best with care and PA support, and travel to the venue. Each session lasted 4-5 hours including lunch. Typically, the first two to three hours was dedicated to discussion, starting in a large group to introduce the main theme (gap) and relevant information. Then breaking into smaller groups to enable everyone to contribute. And coming back to the bigger group to share learning and agree points. Refreshments and short breaks were built in. Lunch followed then the chosen activity away from dialogue.

- *Some time is incorporated to enjoy getting to know each other as people first and away from focussed discussion e.g., going for a walk, creative time.*

'Downtime' activities were determined by each group. Young people chose sport, parents chose mindfulness and disabled adults chose long lunch breaks to enable more relaxed chats.

- *Programmes end with a celebration event to share learning and value commitment.*

Each project decided upon the type of celebration, to include food, who to invite and who to present certificates of participation. Certificates were optional and suggested as a way of valuing individual contributions. Everyone felt certificates were important and invited friends, supporters, family members. Certificates were presented by a director of social services (young people's project), principal social worker (disabled adults project) and migration partnership lead (parents project). All were key people to help with mending gaps and taking project outcomes forward.

- *It is not always possible to mend gaps but sometimes sharing information about what is not possible to change as well as what can be is helpful to people's understanding. It provides an opportunity to get a better understanding of each other's roles.*

This was key to inviting people such as community safety officers, department of work and pensions staff, social services managers and educational advisors.

- *Mend the gap is a rights-based approach to enabling participants to use their experiential knowledge to find solutions to the problems they face. Collectively an environment is created where everyone is supported to develop their potential and act towards making changes.*

Each project established information key to promoting and supporting people's rights, some people heard about this for the first time. For example, young people had never heard of the United Convention of Children's Rights and found about key articles for the first time. Parents did not know they had choices in respect of their children's education or complaints processes. Disabled adults did not know about flexibility available within DWP processes.

- *Projects are outcome focussed to enable new ideas to be developed and promote change.*

Each project identified suggestions for mending gaps. Dialogue was entered into with those who could assist with mending gaps. Outcomes for each project are identified in the next chapter.

- *A final evaluation and resources from the learning is co-produced.*

Each project devised an evaluation strategy and made a recorded evaluation of key learning, discussed in the next chapter.

- *Co-ownership of the project outcomes continues beyond the project ending to review and sustain impact.*

Each project has established legacies such as contributing to a publication, presenting project finding at a conference, developing new projects and support groups, discussed in the next chapter.

I shall now identify how data was collected with the supporting research method before explaining how data was analysed and triangulated.

Focus Groups

In line with participatory methodology, focus groups presented an opportunity to work collaboratively and value expertise in the group (Goss and Leinback, 1996). I saw it as an

opportunity to identify interest with co-facilitating discussion and co-designing the questions proposed. I made this suggestion to the contact made with each group, requesting this was offered to all group members. As I did not mostly know the group participants except for the contact person for a group of social workers, no one took up that offer. The feeling was very much expressed that they were happy for me to take the lead and devise the questions. I came to reflect upon this as an indication of the importance of building relationships. As Kitzinger points out, it is the process of the group working well together that builds trust so that problems are explored as a unit rather than as individuals (Kitzinger, 1995). On reflection, I feel I could have developed a more participatory approach if I had planned to meet more than once with each group.

I spent considerable time, as would be expected of a researcher, with planning the focus exercise. Bloor et al ((2007) helpfully distinguish focus groups from group interviews, wherein the objective of asking pre -determined questions is to elicit the group's answers to those questions. They see the focus groups facilitator's questions as a focusing exercise:

'Using *pre -determined questions with the objective 'not primarily to elicit the group's answers but rather to stimulate discussion...clarifying…In a group interviews the interviewer seeks answers, in focus groups the facilitator seeks group interaction'* (ibid, p. 43).

 I sought to get a balance between asking the type of questions that would focus debate on impact, effectiveness, outcomes and overall, what difference involvement made. The focusing exercise I devised gave two sets of questions; one which was designed to be more specific with the topics raised and the other which was devised to be extremely basic. The purpose of this distinction was to see how discussion evolved to identify key points which could either come from the questions asked or the group discussion itself. As I discovered, the central feature of the focus group was the interaction based on the main theme presented. Kitzinger (1994) defines a focus group as an 'organised discussion'. Her research into the significance of 'interaction' in a focus group came from her analysis of 40 focus group studies in which there was no evidence of participants' conversation (Kitzinger, 1994). She argued that interaction is crucial to enable participants to ask questions of each other, as well as to reflect upon their own experiences (ibid). Presenting pre-determined research questions is considered an effective way of exploring participants' subjective experiences

(Merton and Kendall, 1946). The questions I devised were sub-questions focussed on the main question:

'*What difference does service user and carer involvement in social work education make*?'

Sub questions were as follows:

1. When did you study or become involved with social work education?
2. In what ways have you experienced service user/carer involvement in social work education?
3. Which were most effective and why?
   Which were least effective and why?
4. What difference did involvement make to you? Your role? Professional education? Practice? Anything else?
5. What were your expectations of involvement and how have they been met?
6. In your view, what has changed as a result of involvement?
7. What were the main gaps between people receiving services and those delivering them?
8. How do you think these gaps can be mended?
9. In what ways does involvement address issues of power? Equality? Discrimination?
10. Please identify three words to summarise your experience of involvement.

I prepared to use all of these with half of the focus groups and just five of these questions (1-5) with the other half (three and two given the uneven total number). In fact, I never got as far as raising all sub- questions in any group. In my role as facilitator, I focussed on promoting interaction, ensuring everyone had an opportunity to speak. In three of the focus groups, there were people with limited verbal communication, so I was especially conscious of managing the pace. Whilst I was the researcher leading on many aspects such as clear introduction, addressing ethical issues and consent forms, ensuring the voice recorder was operating accurately, I felt a strong sense of support in the group. Participants supported each other by asking supplementary questions, asking someone to relay an anecdote, clarifying what someone was saying and developing the topic. In one group early in the process I was conscious of one person contributing a lot whilst another was completely silent. The silent participant expressed feeling comfortable with the other person advocating on behalf of the group. She seemed comfortable with not feeling pressured to

speak and she nodded in agreement throughout when other members contributed. Within each group most participants knew each other and seemed to have established a good rapport. This was evidenced when people with speech impairments contributed with other participants translating on their behalf.

Altogether, three evaluations from each Mend the Gap project and five transcripts from each focus group, generated sufficient rich data for analysis, driven by the main research question.

3.3.8 Data Analysis.

As the focus of this study was to explore the impact of involvement in social work education from a range of perspectives, the two sources of data were collected in different ways to build a much deeper account of respondents' experiences. Both data sets were triangulated with thematic analysis to manage the depth of data and present original and illuminating findings. Ultimately this establishes the basis of the contribution my research makes to the subject field.

Mend the Gap data analysis.

Each group discussed how to evaluate their learning in line with Transformative Participatory Evaluation (T-PE) processes (Cousins and Whitmore 1998) . The weekly reflections informed the groups approach to final project evaluations. Evaluation headings were developed by some of the co-participants who wanted to take a more active role with co-facilitating a project evaluation in the first project. These headings were shared with subsequent projects and agreed they reflected the topics people wanted to provide feedback on. On reflection, perhaps we could have not shared the previous project headings. Although it was made clear that the option was available to disregard these and devise a new evaluation strategy, the group felt these headings reflected what and how they wanted to provide feedback. It could have been interesting thought to see if similar headings were generated by different participants. What was most important was that all participants were invited to contribute their ideas, agree the process and explore any disagreement which is the foundation of transformative project evaluation (T-PE) (Cousins

and Whitmore, 1998) . Transformative project evaluation, T-PE has been defined as a process whereby:

" *Participants produce socially constructed knowledge through dialogue. As knowledge informs the evaluation, its creators are empowered by seeing their knowledge being used* ". (Harner,2014, p.3)

The T-PE evaluations are presented in the next chapter, with summary feedback. (Chapter four).

The wealth of feedback generated from three evaluations was applied to reflexive TA to triangulate data with focus group data, thus bringing overall coherence to the research findings analysis. In addition, we made a brief recorded evaluation of participants' experiences which people felt was a natural way to describe their experiences. Drawing inspiration from Zoetti's work on participatory videos (2013), this approach has the potential to empower marginalised groups by granting them an opportunity to have their voices heard. The overall evaluation was enhanced by hearing participants describe in their own words how they experienced the projects. (The procedure for accessing the video recording can be found in appendix four).

 I shall briefly summarise how focus group data was analysed next before explaining the reflexive TA approach.

Focus group data analysis.

As explained, focus groups were recorded by Dictaphone with verbatim transcripts produced for each. I shall outline the steps for this to demonstrate how I sought to ensure having accurate data for rigorous analysis.

Transcription.

"*There cannot be a perfect transcript of a tape –recording. Everything depends upon what you are trying to do in the analysis, as well as upon practical considerations involving time and resources*". (Silverman, 1993, p.1240).

The challenges of transcription cannot be underestimated. I recorded each focus group in order to produce solid evidence and data for rigorous analysis. My greatest fear was that the recording would not work, so I tested this at the start of each meeting by way of asking participants to introduce themselves. I also hoped this could help put participants at ease with the voice recorder equipment. Bloor et al (2001) recommend this experiment as an aid to identifying individual voices, expressing caution about where the recorder is placed to avoid noise interruption(ibid, p.42). I encountered challenges such as distinguishing between strong local accents when external building works were taking place and when a coffee machine could be heard in the background. I listened to the recordings over and over until I was satisfied that every word was accurately written down.

It is estimated that one hour of recorded focus group may take eight hours to transcribe (Bloor et al, ibid, p.60). My experience matched this. The complex nature of transcribing from detail group interaction was necessarily time consuming to produce accurate transcripts. I encountered everything that Bloor et al highlight (ibid), hence their framework provided extremely helpful guidance. To ensure including all speakers, this meant including brief extracts of speech such as comments in agreement with the main person speaking. Also ensuring that speech was transcribed as it occurred, not 'tidied up', (Bloor et al, ibid, p.61) thus pauses and repetition was included.

"*In summary, the transcript needs to reproduce as near as possible the group as it happened, so that anyone reading the transcript can really 'see' how the group went.*"

(Bloor et al, ibid, p.61).

In addition to these pointers, I was extremely careful to interpret words which were unclear. If ultimately, I did not feel able to do this which occurred in just two occasions, I noted that the word was unclear, but it did not detract from the meaning of the sentence. I completed the first transcription straight after the focus group took place whilst it was still fresh in my

mind and I could visualise people when hearing their voices. Even so, I wished I had concentrated even more during discussion to aid later transcription. For example, I spent hours going over and over the recording of a joke someone made in an extremely strong dialect. I had not heard the punchline properly in the group and just enjoyed the ensuing laughter. Trying to catch the punchline from the recording was very tricky. I regretted not asking for the punchline to be repeated in the group which could have saved me lots of time later.

To identify participants, I used initials until I was satisfied that all transcripts were accurate. I then replaced initials with a letter not associated with the person's name to assure anonymity. Transcription codes include, number and date of focus group, e.g., FG1, 6-12-2017. Bold or italics are used to indicate where the participant places emphasis on a word. I have stated where any word was 'unclear/inaudible' which has been noted was minor and exceptional and did not detract from understanding the sentence.

The ultimate rigour and reflexivity of the study was assured by applying reflexive TA, presented next.

3.3.9 Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

As introduced in the previous chapter, Reflexive thematic analysis is a flexible qualitative analysis tool that can be applied across different research paradigms, theoretical perspectives and epistemological approaches (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2013, 2019). They distinguish different orientations of TA, emphasising that the reflexive approach requires the researcher to actively decide on a 'version', pointing out that 'within our reflexive approach, all variations are possible'. That, 'what is vitally important is that your analysis is theoretically coherent and consistent'. (Braun and Clarke, 2019, p.1).

The focus group questions were designed to gain insight into service users' and carers' accounts of their experiences and perspectives. The themes generated by Mend the Gap participants came through collective experiences of structures and systems that people wanted to change. Braun and Clarke distinguish between a 'top down' or 'theoretical thematic analysis' that is driven by the specific research question and a 'bottom up' or

'inductive' one that is more driven by the data itself. My analysis was driven by the main research question which Braun and Clarke suggests 'treats the data as giving us meaning' (Braun and Clarke, 2019, p.12). They highlight how, 'qualitative research involves a series of questions, and there is a need to be clear about the relationship between these different questions' (ibid, p.14). I felt that a theoretical thematic analysis approach at the 'latent level' (ibid, p.13) was consistent with the aims of my research and research question that would enable me to get to the rich detail of the meaning. That is, beyond what the authors distinguish as the semantic level (ibid, p.13), which does not go beyond the surface meaning of the data (ibid, p.12). This brought conceptual coherence with the experiential and social constructivist theories underpinning the study, which value and report participant's experiences and examines the ways in which meanings and experiences are the effects of collective discourse. Thus, a rich and detailed analysis was undertaken adhering to identify themes from participants' experiences.

 Reflexive TA is described as a recursive process, whereby 'the researcher is constantly moving back and forth between the entire data set, the coded extracts of data under analysis and analysis of data produced' (ibid, p.15). By adhering to this framework and engaging a peer to review codes and identify themes, I clearly explained the active choices I made in the analysis process.

The primary aim of this study was to identify what difference involving people with lived experiences in social work education and ultimately practice, has made. A further objective of my research was to demonstrate how this could be achieved, by presenting Mend the Gap as a model for achieving more equal and co-produced learning, inclusive of a wide range of diverse perspectives. Whilst the focus of the research has been within social work education, the transferability of the findings is applicable to a wider range of professional and higher education settings. (Later discussed in chapter five). I thematically analysed each data set from the two distinct research methods. Core themes were identified to allow the research aims and objectives to be met. The method undertaken is a six-step framework which is described in the next chapter in relation to analysing the research findings. This brings me to reflect upon how I undertook coding of the data which was the beginning of writing at each stage of the process. Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013, 2019) recommend the use of 'Nvivo' as a qualitative data management software programme for scanning the data

and identifying a series of possible codes. I never got to grips with this as I would have liked to, managing such a large volume of data. I found that working through the data with flip charts, post it notes and highlighter pens, helped me to become familiar with the data in the depth thematic analysis requires. It also served to make the process clear and transparent which helped with the writing stages. I would like to get to try again to master use of software and compare the difference it makes, in future research. This brings me to summarise reflections on the limitations of my study and then the conclusion to this chapter.

3.3.10 Limitations of the study.

One of the inherent limitations often attributed to qualitative research studies relates to the internal role of the researcher and risk of personal bias in aspects of the research. I like the way that Galdas (2017) has grappled with this debate, pointing out that,

"*Those carrying out qualitative research are an integral part of the process and final, product, and separating from this is neither possible nor desirable*" (2017, p.2).

In this way, the internal role of the researcher does not limit the study, rather it is a strength. Rather than think about researcher bias, the researcher should be transparent and reflexive. As explained earlier in this chapter, I placed emphasis on reflexivity throughout the study, regularly reviewing my positionality specifically in relation to acknowledging my own privilege and how awareness of this was critical to promoting equitable outcomes with marginalised members of society. I maintained a reflective journal to ensure that I captured my reactions and emotions following each focus group and mend the Gap sessions. At each stage of the data analysis phase, I reflected on how my own views and experiences may have infiltrated the study.

As previously noted, one limitation I do feel I could have avoided with some forward thinking, was adapting my information sheets and consent forms to make them 'easy read' for learning disabled participants in focus groups. This was a suggestion that participants with learning disabilities made which I agreed I should have thought of. I read through everything and was satisfied that participants understood all elements of the research and their consent as required. This was not raised by the contact person at the organisation with whom I arranged the focus group. This is not to suggest that it was anyone's other than my

responsibility to present the information in an accessible format. However, I wished I had thought about it which is picked up on in later discussion (chapter five).

3.3. 11 Chapter conclusion.

This chapter has outlined the methodology and methods that underpinned the study on which the thesis is based. The epistemological foundations of the study are located within a participatory post–positive paradigm which aims to gather in depth data, to gain insight and understanding of the situations and problems experienced by those who are part of the system being examined (Tekin and Kotoman, 2013, p.5). Key concepts from the international definition of social work have informed my choice of methods. Critical theories have underpinned my epistemological perspective. Methods of data collection and analysis have been introduced, demonstrating the compatibility of analytical methods with the main research question. The significance of the researcher/participant relationship and the importance of reflexivity was highlighted. Ethical processes have been identified. The limitations of the study were discussed in respect of how the research design could have been improved. Altogether, a robust basis has been established for conducting the research which brings an innovative dimension to existing research methods.

Chapter Four.

The Research: Findings and Analysis

4.1 Introduction.

This chapter presents the findings from both research methods utilised in the study. As introduced in the previous chapter, a triangulation approach was taken to strengthen and diversify the use of methods to collect data on the same subject. This was to specifically address the main research question; *what difference does service user and carer involvement make in social work education*?

Five focus groups were facilitated to capture the experiences of those who have directly contributed to or experienced involvement in social work education. The objective of this method was to evaluate the impact of involvement and evidence of change.

Three Mend the Gap projects were implemented, based on Participatory Action Research principles, to co-produce new knowledge and outcomes. The objective of this method was to evaluate the impact of these projects and evidence of change.

The overall aim of triangulation is summarised by Flick (2002):

"*Triangulation is less a strategy for validating results and procedures than an alternative to validation which increases scope, depth and consistency in methodological proceedings* "(p.227)

Consistent with each research method data analysis was undertaken from two approaches. Reflexive thematic analysis (Reflexive TA - Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019) was applied to focus group findings providing a rich and detailed analysis of the qualitative data generated. This highlighted themes and patterns in the respondents' experiences from which I determined core themes. Analysis of Mend the Gap projects differed in accordance with transformative participatory evaluation principles (Fernandes, 1982, Fals Borda, 1987, Gaventa, 1993). Participants were involved in all stages of evaluation, from design to sharing decisions on key learning points. To bring coherence to the data analysis, reflexive TA was applied to the transformative participatory evaluations from which I was able to determine core themes generated by all three projects. Triangulation of data enabled me to gain good

understanding from different perspectives, strengthening the inquiry and ultimately the original contribution of my research.

The implementation of the research is introduced with some key quotes from participants to illustrate the strengths of each method.

"If there is one thing, we should all take away from this programme, it is the remarkable complexity of the interaction of cultures, social structures, communities, government, agencies that makes up the asylum/seeker refugee experience. The only way to make sense of this is to keep talking openly, critically and frankly. Keep speaking, thinking and challenging your views. Only then can we move past bigotry, fear and marginalisation".

(Student Mend the Gap participant)

"I have been involved in social work education for over ten years, going into University telling students about my experiences of using mental health services which has helped me to put my bad experiences into positive use. By taking part in a Mend the Gap programme there was much more opportunity to share my experiences with students and to learn from them. It was better because we got to know each other, there was a lot more trust as it was a two-way experience rather than one way, going into a classroom"

(Mend the Gap participant with lived experiences)

"You were just told to talk about your experiences and that doesn't provide enough of a structure …. …..so, I think that that causes problems and it also perhaps gives students the wrong idea about the relationship between service users and academics. It's not really equipping them, it's kind of giving them the reverse message."

(Focus group participant with lived experiences).

"We *didn't have any service users or carers involved in our course. Now that I have heard about other students' experiences, I think we went to the wrong University. I now feel like we have missed out …we need to go back and learn again with service users and carers"*

(Focus group participant, social worker)

The above statements from research participants demonstrate the wide range of ways that people with lived experiences can be involved with students and social workers education

and practice. Learning together to co-produce knowledge is a two-way process enabling a depth of learning and critical reflection, building trust and relationships between people. Service user and carer involvement in social work education is a fundamental requirement yet some students report not having this experience. Academics drive the agenda for involvement, yet it is not consistently applied on all social work courses. This is a problem which could be resolved if people with lived experiences drove the agenda for education and professional development. It is timely to revisit educational structures informed by participant's views and experiences, evidenced by my research.

4.2 Research Process.

Three Mend the Gap programmes were conducted over an eighteen-month period. Five focus groups took place over a seventeen-month period.

Section one describes the research procedures for Mend the Gap projects with the key aim to explain what happened, what was learned and what the outcomes were. Building on the previous chapter introducing methodology and research design, the research process and data analysis based on transformative participatory evaluation is explained. Outcomes from these projects have been applied to reflexive thematic analysis, identifying core themes from this methodology also, demonstrating impact and evidence of change.

Section two describes the research procedures for focus groups with the same aim of describing what took place, what was learned and what the outcomes were. Focus groups are thematically analysed in relation to Braun and Clarke's 'Reflexive TA' method (2006, 2019). Outcomes from focus groups demonstrate the impact of involvement and evidence of change.

Section three draws together the main findings of the triangulated data to conclude this chapter and introduce the next of 'Discussion'.

4.3 Section One: Method One.

4.3.1 Implementation of Mend the Gap projects.

I am often asked for a written guide on conducting a 'Mend the Gap' project which is not an approach whereby the content can be scripted. What defines a Mend the Gap project is the ethos base and key principles. Key features of a Mend the Gap approach were introduced in the previous chapter, suggesting a framework for co-facilitating a project which I hope will inspire others to replicate the approach in other educational/professional contexts. I shall now describe how each Mend the Gap project was accomplished. Applying key features of the Mend the Gap approach as a participatory action research orientation is a new development specific to this research. I view the natural alignment in the aims of PAR, explored in the previous chapter, which the following quote is a brief reminder of:

"It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities. " (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p.1)

Outcomes from Mend the gap projects demonstrate the successful 'bringing together' of these aims. Further, the specific aims of PAR 'to empower, motivate and build self- esteem and develop community solidarity' (Reason and McArdle, 2004, p.3) are demonstrated. The unique contribution of the Mend the Gap approach is proposed as a new member to the family of action orientated research approaches which Reason and Bradbury describe (2001).

4.3.2. Mending the gaps with unaccompanied asylum - seeking young people and social workers.

The starting point of a mend the gap approach is meeting with those who are in receipt of services or who are so marginalised as to not be. This is especially pertinent in the asylum seeker community context. As explained by a parent participant in the first Mend the Gap project; parents setting the agenda made all the difference to taking part (Beresford et al, in

Chiapparini, 2016). Fundamentally from the outset this was a significant starting point for young people to set the agenda instead of adult professionals.

The first meeting with young people, co-facilitated by me and IPC (Investing in People and Culture) manager, was to explain the aims of the project which included the principles of PAR and Mend the Gap approach and identify from their experiences, gaps they would like to be mended.

I had prepared a script for myself in addition to the information sheets and consent forms I needed to explain, to make sure that I covered all key points about the research. This was largely informed by ethical considerations, shortly to return to. Although I had conducted previous Mend the Gap projects, I felt like a novice researcher in this context. Introducing myself as a 'part time PHD student' brought an awareness to the start of a new research journey on which I wanted participants to feel confident in my ability to guide and protect them.

One ethical consideration that quickly emerged for me from my first introduction to young people was to ensure that I was not raising expectations of changing everything for the better. I was concerned about being seen to have a 'magic wand'. The process of exploring the aims of Mend the Gap and participatory action research began with hearing about young people's experiences of social work support since arriving in the UK. By listening to each other, very quickly a common bond and a feeling of being less alone with difficult experiences was established amongst young people, most of whom were meeting each other for the first time. My field notes from the first session reflected upon young people's experiences of professionals 'saying they would do things and not following this up'. I felt this illustrated the benefit of a participatory approach whereby we could share responsibility for co-producing transformative outcomes. This felt a positive contrast to young people's disappointment when one person they relied upon did not do something on their behalf.

Supported by three interpreters, fourteen males aged 16-17 from five different countries - Eritrea, Kurdistan, Iran, Iraq and Ethiopia - identified the following key gaps from their experiences that they wanted to mend:

- Children's Rights in the UK   Gaps in understanding what these are

- Education   Gaps in accessing appropriate education, only
                                 attending part -time.

- Age Assessments   Gaps in professional knowledge and young people's
                                 understanding.

- Professional roles   Gaps with lack of explanation of roles and
                                 responsibilities within Children's social care.

- Funding and resources   Gaps with IT/TV resources and differences between
                                 different authorities.

Notably all young people were male which reflects the gender disparity that more unaccompanied males than females flee their countries to seek asylum, mostly due to heightened risks of trafficking of young women (Pew Research Centre, 2016).

The UK Home Office defines an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child as:

'A person under 18 who, in the absence of documentary evidence establishing age appears to be under that age, is applying for asylum in his or her own right and has no relative or guardian in the United Kingdom' (Gov.Uk, 2020).

One female was hoping to join the group but informed the IPC project manager that her foster carer would not permit her to. This was due to the foster carer's concern about the dominant male environment and lack of clarity about the group's purpose. Mend the Gap like other forms of participatory research, is an organic process about which I have noticed some people have reservations, not knowing the content or pre- determined outcomes.

The starting point of the project raised several considerations for me as a researcher which I had examined in preparation with my ethical application. I was working with young people, some of whom were understandably traumatised by their experiences of getting to the UK. It was first and foremost a basic right that they had interpreter support and essential to establish that their participation was voluntary and that they had access to appropriate emotional support if required. In my introduction where I explained key features of my role as a researcher/ social worker and educator I sought to ensure that everyone understood

there was no expectation for anyone to disclose their personal experiences. In discussion with the IPC project manager, he explained that the common request from professionals wanting to involve young people in their training was to ask them to begin by telling their stories. As a starting point it is unimaginable to consider a young person standing in front of a group of strangers describing painful experiences, yet this seems to be considered a reasonable expectation by some professionals. From the outset, the ethical framework for the project assuring, confidentiality, consent , support and voluntary choice to participate or opt out, was made very clear in accordance with Durham University sociology department's ethical processes. By introducing PAR as the main method for working towards equitable roles as co-researchers and key partners, participants shared responsibility for ensuring the welfare of all in the group was respected by not sharing confidential information outside of the group. Further, it was essential that goals were agreed and shared, open to ongoing review and negotiation. This applied equally to social work students who joined in session two.

As described in the previous chapter, as much as I had prepared to ensure the research was ethically sound, ethical issues required continual reflection and attention. For example, confidentiality was re- visited regularly throughout the project as young people wanted to know what it meant to them. They expressed feeling pressurised to discuss very personal and traumatic history with many different people which they said left them feeling 'embarrassed' and 'ashamed'. I was extra cautious to ensure that confidentiality was made clear at the beginning and end of each session to minimise the possibility of confidentiality being breached. If any concerns about someone's welfare needed to be passed on, this would be clearly explained. Most importantly, I was seeking to ensure that no one would be left dealing with such difficult feelings alone. Key learning points from an 'ethics of community participation project' (Banks and Manners, 2012) were helpful to anticipating ethical issues (with all Mend the Gap projects). For example:

Setting the tone at the first meeting – '*The first meeting of a collaborative research group is important in setting a non-threatening tone and participatory ethos. It is vital to hear from everyone, allowing people to start from their own experiences and to feel respected and valued' (*Banks and Manners, 2012*, p.12).*

The first session where everyone came together focussed on introductions underpinned by a key aim of the Mend the Gap approach to meet as people first. We introduced ourselves, sharing a little about where we are from, hobbies and interests.

Clarity about power and responsibility – '*It is important to be clear about where power and responsibility lie in relation to different aspects of a research project. If there are parts that require specific academic skills or certain outputs for funders, then this should be acknowledged. Equally, thought should be given as to whether some academic processes can be demystified or adapted for use by community participants (e.g., a participatory literature review)*' (ibid).

The nature of co-working, research and co-production were explained in relation to PHD principles and purpose. This presented a unique opportunity for young people to have equal participation along with a group of adults with professional status. As they had already met to find out about the approach and set the agenda for the project, the power dynamics from the outset were different to anything young people had experienced; they were starting to feel the difference between 'formal' and 'informal' learning.

Time for building trust-'It *takes time to build a group and generate good working relationships. In this group, by the third meeting people were more relaxed and able to speak out and challenge each other*' (ibid).

As explained, the principle of meeting as people first is prioritised in a Mend the Gap approach. One way of achieving this is to identify something people enjoy doing. Young people enjoyed being active so to build positive relationships we had an activity each week following our discussions. We played table tennis, football and other sports which showed what young people were good at. In the fourth week we had a climbing - wall activity which demonstrated the level of trust we were building in the group.

The second meeting introduced seven social work students and NESWA project manager who had a background in working with children and young people to support their rights. Another principle of Mend the Gap projects is to aim to achieve a balance of numbers to ensure that service users are not out - numbered by professionals, which is often the

experience at review meetings and events. However, in this case the tables were turned as young people outnumbered students.

Weekly dialogue centred on the themes underpinned by the gaps young people identified. Social work students identified with gaps in their knowledge and understanding of supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people. The eight-week project consisted of the first meeting with young people to determine the agenda as has been described. The following six sessions were based on dialogue to mend the gaps, the content of which I shall cover shortly. Each session ended with an activity, based in the university sports centre. Young people identified the types of activities they enjoyed and shared a discussion with others around their interests. This marked a point in the participatory action research process where they took the initiative to co-facilitate and plan group activities. Taking part in physical activities or being a spectator was a very positive way of building relationships and gave young people the opportunity to shine in what they were good at doing. The final session was a celebratory event to share the projects findings, later described.

The content of weekly dialogue that highlighted gaps and how to mend them, is summarised by the six topics below:

(i)   Children's rights.

We identified many gaps in knowledge when young people heard about the United Convention on the Rights of a Child and their rights in relation to 42 articles for the first time. Social work students said they had not studied this. Young people were surprised to learn that in relation to Article 12, they have the right to have their views considered when adults are making decisions about them, such as where they live, who with, who they have contact with, where they go to school. Young people felt they had no say in any of these issues. No one had heard of the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS). Rather than me following this up for information which could be a common task for a researcher to explore, in keeping with participatory ethos we agreed to invite people from NYAS to our group. This meant we all found out about the service at the same time, asked questions and clarified how young people could benefit from advocacy support. It was established that the advocacy service can support a 'looked after child' living in local authority accommodation.

As most young people lived in private rented supported accommodation, this meant they were not entitled to support. NYAS recognised this was a gap in their service provision as clearly, all unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people would benefit from advocacy support. It was agreed they would work in partnership with ICP to ensure young people's rights are supported and implemented. Young people finding out about the role of advocates became one of the most important outcomes of the programme. Those in local authority accommodation could be supported by an advocate who could accompany them to meetings and ensure they understood everything. Social work students found out how to refer young people for an advocate. NYAS arranged to work in partnership with ICP to ensure children and young people understood their rights. We were finding things out together. There were no magic wands.

"I *never heard of an advocate before today. I am really pleased I can have this support to help me understand things better and have all the rights I am entitled to as a young person. All young people seeking asylum need an advocate*". (YP)

We found that gaps could be mended by ensuring that all young people are made aware of their rights on arrival in the UK. It is essential that professionals in their training have knowledge of the UN Convention on children's rights.

(ii)   Housing.

This topic highlighted further gaps about housing as young people over 16 were more likely to be placed in private rented accommodation (Perry, 2012). Young people expressed how isolated they felt in rented accommodation and their preference for foster care. Most young people had a short experience of foster care on arrival in the UK. (The local authority supports young people under 18 in accordance with section 20 of the Children Act 1989 (Gov.UK)). Varied experiences were described; for example, one young person was put on a public bus without knowing why or where he was going to. The foster carer had arranged for him to be met by someone from ICP at the other end, but the young person spent the whole journey terrified about where he was being sent to. The foster carer clearly did not know that the young person had a right to an interpreter; the social worker could have arranged for all such information to be explained. It was agreed that social workers were particularly well placed to make a communication link with young people. Young people

favoured the benefits of foster care over independent living, explaining they felt part of a family environment which is especially important when they are separated from their own.

"*I really enjoyed my time with the foster carer. I learned English quickly and played my favourite sport football with other children. Unfortunately, I was only allowed to stay a short time. Now I am in my own accommodation and feel very lonely. I don't have a TV to watch or anyone to talk to in the evening*" (YP).

We found that gaps could be mended by maintaining young people in foster care until they are 18. Also, by ensuring that foster carers have suitable training to support unaccompanied young people.

Social workers are key to mending gaps with young people. It is important to remember that unlike most young people social workers support, migrant children and young people have had to flee from chronic civil unrest. As summarised in a research report investigating 'social work with unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people':

'*What sense do the young people make of being sent so far away from home? I found that few social workers know. This is not because they have not asked the child but because they do not get an answer. Young people reject attempts to engage them in life story work. Many do not know where their families are and have no contact with them. These asylum seekers, unlike indigenous young people, do not provide social workers with parental names and dates of birth, family composition and precise address or telephone numbers for family members. Social workers are aware of the young people's reluctance to talk to them as authority figures and understand their fear that disclosure could result in expulsion. Silence can be a pre-dominant feature of their relationship with the social worker. Trust comes slowly, sometimes over years*' (Kohli, 2017 p.32)

This research was based on interviews with thirty-five social workers in the context of 5,000 unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people being looked after or supported by local authorities. I could happily cite the report in total; it was so valuable in the resonance it had with young people and social workers' experiences. However, I hope that this relatively long quote captures some key areas of learning, which it certainly did for me when all in our group identified with it and agreed that it was accurate. The gaps between young people and social workers were very wide due to lack of trust. The general advice to all young

people coming into the UK was 'trust no one'. This highlighted perhaps the most crucial and important gap for young people. If they could not trust adults who were there to support and protect them, could this make them more vulnerable to trusting adults who spoke their language and were looking for young people to 'groom' as terrorists? A growing body of literature is emerging about the links between migrants and terrorism (Schmidt, 2016, Simeon, 2018) summarised by Koser and Cunningham (2017) 'with narratives of empowerment through violence' (p.215).

We found that gaps could be mended by building trust through engaging in open dialogue and learning from each other's experiences .

(iii)   Language.

Young people were keen to learn English as quickly as possible. The ultimate self-protection is surely to be able to communicate in the dominant spoken language. Living in foster care meant young people could pick up the language and watch TV. This supplemented the limited time they spent at college. However, most young people did not live in foster care and had no access to the internet or TV. It was agreed that access to these resources is essential. For example, three Kurdish young males living together spent more time talking in their own language when they wanted to improve their English. Young people spend the little money they have on mobile data so they can use Wi-Fi.

We found that gaps could be mended by accessing young people speedily to English classes. Also, by ensuring that internet access is available in all accommodation young people are placed in.

(iv)   Education.

Young people in further education had expected to attend college full time, however this varied widely between authorities with most young people attending three days per week. One teacher had offered to email students with extra work to help improve English outside of college. Whilst this was a helpful gesture it also demonstrated a lack of understanding that young people have no access to computers/ the internet outside college.

We found that gaps could be mended by ensuring young people attend college full time and have access to computers and the internet outside of college.

(v)   Policies

It was notable that young people were becoming more confident with expressing their experience and views, and social work students were becoming clearer about their roles and responsibilities to promote social justice. Participants were feeling empowered through experiential learning to want to mend gaps with those who produce policies and guidance for young people. We had made links with the local migration partnership who were very interested and supportive of our project. They invited some members of the group to attend a meeting with the Home Office to share findings and most importantly young people's experiences. (I as researcher, the NESWA project manager, IPC project manager and a social work student attended. Two young people planned to come but did not make it due to transport problems.) This proved to be quite a difficult meeting where the theory of what young people were offered did not match the reality. For example, some views expressed by social workers questioned why unaccompanied asylum seekers should be considered in any way different to any other young person in care. This explicit lack of understanding about the needs of unaccompanied young people strongly reinforced the messages from Kohli's research:

'Any migrant, whether economic or political, faces a dilemma in balancing integration into the host society with 'disintegration' from the society left behind. Social workers offer threads of connection'.

(ibid)

The disconnection between social workers understanding of young people's experiences was abundantly clear in this meeting. Another suggestion made by a social worker was that it might not be fair for a young person to learn English if they would be returned to their home country when eighteen. This was quite a worrying viewpoint on many levels, most pertinently because it revealed a premise that it may be reasonable to maintain young people's exclusion from society, thus increasing their vulnerability. When most young people can't wait to celebrate their eighteenth birthday this is the age unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people fear the most.

'As they approach their 18th birthday, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children must apply for extended leave to remain in the UK, and the majority are turned down. However, the

Home Office does not then remove them from the UK. The appeals system is byzantine and inefficient. Many young people go off grid and become more vulnerable. Often the Home Office have no idea where they are or how many of them there are. The removals system is inefficient, under resourced and overwhelmed. You do not become less vulnerable by being 24 hours older. It beggars belief that while we allow foster children to stay put until 21*, we are deliberately sabotaging good work undertaken with unaccompanied children by removing support at a critical juncture' (*Elvin, 2016.*)

This view that young people could be returned to their home country at eighteen gave as strong message as it is conveyed by this research. It also demonstrates a lack of commitment to 'Pathway Planning' which should detail how a child's needs will be met and reviewed every six months (Coram Childrens Legal Centre (CLC), 2018)). We left the meeting feeling disappointed that social workers were not taking a more pro-active stance on such issues, accepting Government policy unquestionably.

We found that this meeting highlighted one of the biggest gaps in need of mending; between those making policy and those most impacted upon.

(vi)   Age assessment

The issue of age was a major gap whereby young people experienced feeling distrusted about knowing their own age. Article 8 of the United Nation Convention on the Rights of a Child (UNCRC), 1989) is 'Preservation of Identity'. This recognised that children have the right to an official record of who they are, their rights to a name, nationality and family ties should be respected. Young people arrive in the UK (and other countries) without ID. All young people said they were given an ID card by UK immigration officers on arrival with 'age disputed' stated on it. Clearly this is a deficit approach from the outside that demonstrates mis- trust. I see it is a clear example of the 'hostile environment' created by the Conservative government in 2013 which has been heavily criticised by The Institute for Public Policy Research(IPPR), (Qureshi et al, 2020). Not only have 'hostile environment' measures failed in the aims to encourage immigrants to voluntarily leave the UK, most significantly they have 'fuelled racism and discrimination and forced individuals into destitution'. (Qureshi et al, ibid p.5).

Local authorities undertake age assessments, with processes and training for social workers varying greatly between them. Young people explained that they are often asked personal questions, nothing is explained to the young person who has a right to know what is being checked; that the process of assessing age is not informed by the young person's culture. Examples shared by young people included a child who has walked barefoot for six years herding cattle could have a very strong body and appear older. This is the same for a child who has lots of facial hair, which is not uncommon for children age 13 and is considered a rite of passage to becoming an adult in some cultures. (Dehaghani and Newman, 2017).

We learned that there is a seven-year difference between the Ethiopian calendar and western calendar (Mbogo, 2020). Students expressed some surprise at this new learning. To them, it was significant knowledge that social workers and other professionals needed to have. Without appreciating that young people were born with such a different calendar, young people could be perceived as lying about their age. All young people confirmed that they had been made to feel they lied about their age. They said they know their age yet were asked lots of questions and described how they were made to feel like 'criminals' with interviews conducted more like 'interrogations'.

"I know my age. I might not know the exact day because we don't celebrate birthdays in my country like people do here. I know I was born in the spring and that I am 16 years old. I have been asked lots of questions even about my mother's age. I feel like people think I am lying all the time when I am telling the truth. " (YP)

We found that gaps could be mended by promoting professionals' cross-cultural understanding of 'age'. Further, we recommended that age assessments should be undertaken only where necessary, not as a matter of course. The best way to mend this gap is to believe the young person.

As has been established in previous chapters, reflection was integral to the research process. Each week we spent time sharing reflections, usually based on notes people had recorded for themselves from the previous week. I was struck by the dedication and openness with which people shared their reflections. Even if only one word or image had been noted the significance of recording that held important meaning for participants. By

sharing reflections, we were finding meanings for the group which was key to identifying the outcomes and recommendations participants wanted.

4.3.3 Project Evaluation.

As introduced in the previous chapter, Transformative Participatory Evaluation (T- PE) was adopted as a natural fit with the research methodology. The following quote from Wiggins et al (2017), is a reminder of the significance of this approach:

"*T-PE grows out of a desire, originally from Latin America, South Asia, and Africa, to create a just society by challenging unequal power structures*" (ibid, p. 253).

Participants wanted to challenge unequal power structures by evaluating learning from the project with the aim of disseminating the findings to improve practice and support to unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors. The project was evaluated at an individual level – using feedback forms with six headings devised by the group, which are summarised below. Coming to this decision to evaluate the project at an individual level, built on the reflective process and demonstrated how people's confidence had increased. Though some young people needed support with writing their feedback, it was notable how much young people's English had also improved. At a group level participants wanted to share their learning from each other. Notably this was the first time people split into two separate groups of young people and social workers, also summarised. In addition, as explained in chapter three, a five-minute recorded evaluation was made to promote participant's voices beyond a written summary (appendix nine).

(T-PE was applied in all Mend the Gap projects. The overall analysis was drawn together through Braun and Clarkes Reflexive thematic analysis method (2006, 2019), to identify core themes (in section two)).

Individual feedback

The extent and richness of responses generated are too sizeable to reproduce, some quotes are incorporated to give a flavour of feedback gathered.

1. **What were your expectations of taking part in the programme – were they met or unmet?**

All participants said they were not sure what to expect but it sounded different. No one had any prior experience of co-production or participatory action research. The main points highlighted by young people were how uncertain they had felt about social workers due to not understanding their role or having an experience where a social worker did not do something they said they would. The main points highlighted by social workers/students, were that they hoped to increase their knowledge from experience to improve their professional practice. Overall, participants conveyed how expectations were exceeded.

 "*I was really nervous at first because I had not had a good experience of social workers, I didn't expect it to be so friendly and to have so much fun. I felt really listened to the whole time, everyone got the chance to say their views. It was definitely the best experience I have had*" (YP)

 "*The aim was to break down barriers and collectively identify gaps in knowledge, hear the voice of the young people, find out what they want to know and to ask, 'what could we do better?' As a student, I wanted to know how I could improve my practice and try to gain insight into our asylum seekers' daily lives and lived experiences… This was very successful, and a great deal of learning was gained by students and the young people alike*.' (Student)

2. **Did you hold any views at the beginning of the programme that have changed?**

All participants said they had changed their views on something, mostly concerned with their own learning. The main points highlighted by young people was how their views of social workers had changed, mostly from feeling distrustful of them as an agent of the state to having more confidence in their position to help. The main points highlighted by social workers/students was how accepting they had been about the roles and tasks of a social worker. Learning from young people's experience led to more critical questioning of approaches informed by western cultural bias.

"*I did not trust anyone before who was a professional, now that I have learned a lot more about social workers and other professionals, I understand a lot more about their roles and how they are trying to help us.*" (YP)

"Hearing *from young people's experiences of age assessments and understanding how much older young people can look has really changed my views about age assessments, it is terrible that they go through so much interrogation to prove their age. In social work we are taught to believe the child so I really think this should apply to all young people*." (Student)

3. **Has taking part in a gap mending programme helped you to have a better understanding of; systems and services in the UK /professional roles/ your own values and beliefs/different cultural perspectives/anything else?**

All participants agreed with all statements. The main points highlighted by young people came from learning that they had rights they had not known of before. This was also the same for social workers/students, who expressed how important it was for social workers to have a good understanding to prioritise ensuring that young people were aware of their rights.

"I now know a lot more about my rights, where I can go for help and who is there to support me. It's a lot more than I knew before. "(YP)

"Finding out about different cultures and the UN convention of children's rights and how young people knew nothing about this was really shocking. I have a much better understanding of how young people should be supported to understand their rights. " (Student)

4. **Can you identify any examples which demonstrate the benefits of participating in the gap mending project?**

A range of examples were shared that demonstrated the benefits of sharing an equal learning platform. Young people highlighted positive experiences of building relationships through different ways, such as one to one conversation, group dialogue and activities. Social workers/students placed emphasis on the cultural knowledge gained and increased confidence with challenging oppressive structures.

"I can think of many examples. Mostly I have enjoyed meeting people, playing sport, finding out about my rights. I feel much more confident now that I know about so many different things" (YP)

"The *cultural learning and opportunity to get to know young people has been invaluable. I feel a lot more informed and confident as a social worker than before. As social workers it is our role to raise questions on behalf of young people to make sure they are listened to, not to tell them how it is which I fear some social workers without cultural knowledge could do* " (Student)

5. **What do you think are the most important things to come from this project?**

Feedback on this point highlighted transformative aspects and future opportunities. Young people placed emphasis on feeling valued, knowing that their experiences matter and that they can continue to influence professional practice. Social workers/students placed emphasis on the value of learning from experience which they felt should be a key feature of all future learning.

"Finding *out about our rights and the support available to us. Knowing that people want to listen to our experiences and improve support is good. I am looking forward to writing the new guidance for social workers*" (YP)

 "*Learning with people directly is infinitely better than learning from text- books and lectures. You can't feel experiences from books, you must feel what people are saying and be in conversation with them to truly learn from their experiences. This should be a key part of future education*" (student)

6. **Would you be interested to be involved with further developments and activities?**

All participants said they would. Young people were particularly keen to co -write new guidance for social workers and support the development of a new drop in with social workers. Students were equally keen to support this and to disseminate learning through conferences and events.

"*It is really important that social workers learn from us what we need and how best to support us*" (YP)

"*It will be good to share our experiences with other students, social workers and especially lecturers who need to know about how effective Mend the Gap is* "(student)

Group feedback.

As with individual feedback, a flavour of feedback is summarised below.

If you could give one key message to students/young people, what would it be?

Young people delivered their messages to students which placed emphasis on the importance of feeling listened to and knowing that their experiences were valuable to social worker's learning and practice:

'I am very glad that you have learned from us about our different cultures, it is important that everyone learns about each other cultures'

'The most important thing as a social worker is to listen to young people and believe what they say'

Students delivered their messages to young people which placed emphasis on the value of learning from their experiences and how new knowledge gained would improve their practice:

'I feel learning from young people has been the best way to learn about different cultures and their experiences. I have learned more from all of you than I have from classroom lectures. I really want you to know how important learning from you all has been, thanks to all of you I will be a much better social worker'

'I have learned so much about all the difficulties you face as young people arriving in the UK. I will always make sure that young people understand my role and others and make sure they have access to an advocate to help support them with their rights'

All feedback was shared so that as a group key gaps and messages were evaluated providing an overall evaluation of learning for the group.

Ultimately it was agreed that the biggest gap to be mended was with promoting young people's rights and social work's global values. The main themes that participants identified as central to young people's support and partnership working were:

- Rights: gaps could be mended by social workers having good knowledge of the UN convention of Children's rights. They can mend the gaps with young people to ensure they know about these.

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- Values: gaps could be mended by social workers having knowledge of different cultural values and being aware of their own western values.
- Information: gaps could be mended by social workers sharing all relevant information with young people.
- Communication: gaps could be mended by social workers ensuring that young people have interpreter support and information in their own language

My own reflection within the evaluation process was underpinned by the theoretical and epistemological approach to the study. Central to T-PE was my belief (shared with others such as Fernandez and Tandon, 1981, Freedman 1998, Harner, 2014) that the intended program beneficiaries should participate in carrying out the evaluation. A potential criticism of this approach is that it is too accepting of what young vulnerable participants say. My experience of the evaluation process proved to be similar to a research study which interviewed ten researchers about their experiences of working with children as co-researchers. This study revealed that the ethical complexities in child co-research demonstrates how this approach is seen as being 'more truthful', 'relevant', better research because of 'better engagement.', making the community more 'invested ' in outcomes which are more likely to be 'sustainable'. (Spriggs and Gillam, 2019, p.8). The co-impact of the research was an important feature but one that participants had the right to withdraw from at any stage.

"*Researchers need strategies in place so that children do not feel under pressure by real or perceived adult expectations*" (ibid, p.12).

Reflexivity was integral to the whole research process. I remained sensitive to my relationship as researcher with all participants and paid special consideration to young participants in relation to ethical aspects. According to Harner (2014):

"*Researcher reflexivity should help ensure ethical practice as well as rigorous practice. Research that is not ethical is not rigorous research*". (p.15)

Harner (ibid) suggests the reflexive researcher asks themselves questions to ensure that research with children as co-researchers is ethical. Questions such as,

'Will child co-research methodology benefit children generally by producing better quality outcomes?'

'In what ways will using child co-research enhance the project?'

-'improve the project', 'collect better data', 'other?'

The project outcomes described next demonstrate the rigour of the research in this respect. Young people were central and essential to identifying from their experiences what they and other young asylum-seeking unaccompanied minors needed.

4.3.4 Project outcomes.

A significant project outcome was the co-production of a 'Ten Step Guide for Social Workers Supporting Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children and Young People on Arrival' (appendix 8). This was co -written with the involvement of a principal social worker and has been shared with local authorities in the region. With the support of the local migration partnership this guidance is also being shared with foster carers. Young people felt that foster carers could benefit from having the same feedback and information from their experiences, as social workers.

Another project outcome was the establishment of a new support group. The 'orientation group' was initiated by young people and a newly qualified social work student who has summarised the benefits of this group:

'*Since qualifying as a social worker I wanted this good work to continue as the 'gap' was now identified. I developed an Orientation Group in XX Local Authority XX...with the Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children. The aim of the Orientation Group is to assist unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people to settle into life in the UK and for them to feel supported…. it has improved young people's well-being and resilience. Unaccompanied children are known to have an increased risk of mental and physical health problems. By promoting and supporting their social, educational, religious and cultural needs the young people have told me they feel respected and supported, and trust has developed. The Mend the Gap project was a significant learning curve for me .This collaborative venture with young people has indeed helped us to 'mend the gap' for the unaccompanied asylum- seeking young people in our local area."*

(Social Work practitioner)

Principles of Mend the Gap underpin the welcome to new members of the group, to ensure they have all information they need. The Ten Step Guide has been reviewed by young people in the 'orientation group' to ensure the aims continue to be met. The guidance is available in appendix eight.

The final session was marked with a celebratory event which is a typical feature of a Mend the Gap approach. The 'Director of People' from a local authority in the region came to present certificates of participation to everyone and hear about the project. Other people supporting young people e.g., foster carers and support workers also came along. This was an important way of valuing everyone's contributions and taking on board the learning. The recorded evaluation was premiered, and the key messages were heard. The director acknowledged the importance of young people's rights and how identified cities in England had a commitment to implementing the UNCRC which should be reviewed regularly. Sadly, one young participant did not get the opportunity to share the project outcomes as he was returned the day after his eighteenth birthday to his home country to fight a war.

Prior to the project starting, the IPC project manager and I were invited invited to contribute to an information session around mending gaps with asylum seekers at a Durham University conference (Centre for Social Justice and Community Action, 2016). Discussions from this event resonated with a key finding from the Mend the Gap project with young people. That is, a key gap in education was in understanding the nature of political conflict which is generally not covered on the social work curriculum. This point is taken forward in making recommendations in the following discussion chapter (five).

The next 'Mend the Gap' programme will now be described. After presenting all three mend the gap projects, the common findings and analysis is brought together (in section two) to establish key evidence and outcomes for validating the effectiveness of this approach.

4.3.5 Mending gaps with asylum seeker parents

This project with single asylum-seeking parents and social work students was identified-with the help of IPC as before. Single asylum seeker parents with children under five were identified as those who could benefit most from early intervention from social work support, yet they feared encountering social workers more than anyone else. The generally held belief in the community was that 'you do not want to get involved with social workers as they will take your children away'. As with the unaccompanied minors project, parents were invited to attend an information meeting about Mend the Gap. From this meeting, with fourteen parents, (thirteen female and one male), the second participatory research project developed. As with the previous project all information about the research and my role was covered. Some parents were keener than others to take on co-researcher roles. Some made it very clear they wanted to attend but would feel anxious about feeling responsible for the group. Two parents had their babies with them and needed to feel OK about leaving the room or being distracted. Three parents put themselves forward as co-researchers.

Having this flexibility in the approach was important to enable people to feel comfortable to attend on their own terms. Given the anxiety parents expressed experiencing about meeting social workers, I felt this could also be a 'get out clause' should they feel too uncomfortable to stay with the project. This presented a new opportunity for three parents to take on the roles of co-facilitators (their preferred title) within the group and promote equal participation of other parents. Research with refugee communities cautions against automatic assumptions that 'participatory research is necessarily an empowering experience for participants'; Dona warns this is 'particularly the case if the aims of the research stop short of advocacy for political or social transformation' (Dona, 2017 cited in Block et al, 2012, p.72). The aims of the research to be transformative, promoting support to parents in the group and community were made explicit. One way to demonstrate this commitment was in the introduction of gaining signed consent. As highlighted in the previous chapter, it has been argued that the process of obtaining written consent can be threatening to people who may feel reluctant to sign documents. (Block et al, 2012). This was one of the first ethical considerations for me; to not impose a culturally bound

approach where consent was a single event. Guided by Mackenzie et al (2007), I could see that:

"iterative models of consent start from the assumption that ethical agreements can best be secured through a process of negotiation, which aims to develop a shared understanding of what is involved at all stages of the research process" (in Block et al, ibid, p.73).

Gaps identified by parents at the first meeting focussed on:

Housing

Female Genital Mutilation (FMG)

Mental Health and Well Being

Finance

Education – adult and children

Safeguarding.

Notably the gender balance was predominantly female in contrast with all male unaccompanied young people. Women explained this is due to the way families' travel, whereby, women and children are sent ahead to the destination country, whilst men plan to follow. Sometimes this results in families being separated for long periods or no repatriation at all. One male parent who participated did not live-in shared hostel accommodation that was only provided to single women. As with young people, parents expressed a preference to meet at the local university which proved to be an equally inspirational venue. Parents really enjoyed the education environment which motivated them to explore possibilities for accessing adult education. They also felt that it was good to get away from the local IPC venue in the community that was most often associated with seeking help such as legal advice with immigration status. The gaps identified by parents at the first meeting informed the themes for weekly dialogue.

A summary of the content of sessions is provided as before, followed by the T-PE.

The first session bringing seven social work students and one qualified practitioner together with parents centred on introductions (as well as previously established ethical practice in relation to PhD processes). Focus was placed on a key aim of the Mend the Gap approach,

to meet as people first. We therefore introduced ourselves and shared a little about ourselves in terms of interests and where we are from. As the first space where everyone was coming together, participants were invited to introduce themselves in relation to their own experiences as they wished. Discussion with parents at the first meeting included keeping personal boundaries safe, so that no one felt they needed to share any personal information. This was highlighted as part of ongoing negotiation with the group.

Generally, the students and practitioner identified with parents, as parents themselves, sharing ages and gender of children. One student identified with another parent's experience of being homeless in the past. Like the example (share in chapter one), of a student and parent in the first Mend the Gap project who recognised each other from standing in the same food bank queue, I was most struck by this open acknowledgement of shared lived experiences of hardship. I felt this changed the perception of a 'professional' to a more individual level which participants came to describe as more 'human'. Experiencing this level of mutuality from the outset, creates an atmosphere of reciprocity and reduces distance between people. This is quite a defining characteristic of Mend the Gap. As parents had already met to learn about the approach and set the agenda for the programme, they and students were starting to understand the value of experiential learning. Together, participants were creating a new atmosphere of openness.

Parent co-facilitators suggested a topic to learn from each other based upon cultural traditions. Having just returned from the Christmas break and Eritrean equivalent celebrations we shared our most important cultural traditions, which was enjoyable, interesting and informative. Most importantly it established the foundation for sharing a range of topics from different cultural perspectives. It established the tone for dialogue around gaps that was key to exchanging cultural knowledge.

Parents were asked to identify an activity they would be comfortable to share with other participants. They were not keen on using the sports hall that was on offer, as young people were. They expressed wanting to do something more relaxing. The proposal put to the group was to incorporate relaxation time at the end of each session. This varied as the weeks progressed. It began with a recorded guided relaxation then as student confidence increased, some developed a guided relaxation which was well received. This was one example of the environment that participants co-created to develop and try out new skills.

The content of the weekly sessions, to explore the six topics identified as gaps by parents at the first meeting, are now summarised.

(i)   Mental Health and Well Being.

Parents identified gaps in talking about mental health as a big problem in the asylum seeker community. They described the shame and stigma associated with having mental health problems based on beliefs such as someone being possessed by an evil spirit or punished due to past life bad deeds. Students began to appreciate how talking about mental health openly and positively might not be well received. They began to see how Western values underpinned professional interventions. The group explored the signs and symptoms of mental health such as depression, stress, isolation. The impact of being separated from family and traumatic events was essential to parents becoming familiar with terminology and language of mental health and wellbeing. It was also essential to finding out about support available and for students to grasp the meaning of cultural sensitivity.

"If a social worker came to a Nigerian family home and started asking questions about mental health, they would not speak about it at all because the traditional Nigerian belief about someone with mental health problems is that they are cursed. If they asked the person about things like if they are sleeping and eating OK, that would be a better way in to find out how someone is doing. Often people are not sleeping and eating enough but they don't make a connection with their mental health." (Parent)

"I now realise that by starting a conversation about 'mental health' the language can be off-putting and what is more important is to find out how the person is coping. We have learned about 'cultural awareness' in class but it has just clicked with these conversations about mental health. …I will go to someone's house with a completely different approach." (Student)

Testimony to the trust that was building in the group came from one participant's observation; that it was the first time they had experienced parents speaking about their own cultural beliefs in front of others. The principal of having some time together away from dialogue was implemented within the context of mental health and well- being as parents chose to have some time for relaxation. This meant that whatever conversations had taken place, where people felt annoyed or upset as the next theme highlights, there

was a structured period of guided relaxation which participants said restored a sense of calm and well -being.

We found that gaps could be mended if professionals had increased awareness and cultural sensitivity when discussing mental health concerns. There needs to be improved services and support available to asylum seekers which was felt to be most important at two points; on arrival and on being refused asylum. This was the point where people said they felt most in crisis, and often suicidal.

(ii)   Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).

FGM is practised in a wide range of countries including those where participants were from: Middle East, Africa, Gambia, Egypt, Kenya, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and Algeria. Parents explained that in such countries the practice is culturally acceptable and seen as the 'norm'. Significantly, many of these countries have anti-FGM laws.

"*In most countries with anti-FGM laws, the legislation is failing to protect women and girls from FGM. Laws are rarely enforced and there is an absence of prosecutions*". (Hurn and Pinder, 2018).

The United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNPFA) estimates that at least fifty –nine countries have passed laws against FGM including the United Kingdom (Equality Now, 2019).

The NHS defines FGM as:

""A procedure where the female genitals are deliberately cut, injured or changed, but there's no medical reason for this to be done" (NHS, 2020).

A representative from a voluntary organisation supporting women asylum seekers and refugees was invited to participate in this session but could not attend. The opportunity for a Mend the Gap approach is to invite people into the dialogue where they can have a role in mending gaps. In this case we wanted to ensure that participants knew about support available to women and children and that accurate information was shared. Instead, we received a package of helpful information and contact numbers for advice and support. There was a lot of expertise in the group which was shared. Social work participants learned that it is a very painful abusive procedure that can seriously harm the health of females.

Women described the long-term problems they had experienced with sex, childbirth and their mental health.

Parents expressed strong views about the gaps in knowledge of FGM, which keeps it as a 'hidden' 'secretive' subject in the community. This might explain why it took sixteen years from the introduction of the Female Genital Mutilation Act in 2003, to the first prosecution made in the UK in 2019. A report was circulated in the group which highlighted that FGM was being performed on younger children, as younger children could not tell anybody about it happening, stating that 'children's services are unsure when to intervene' (Collinson and Furst, 2019). Social workers discussed difficulties around knowing how and when to intervene, as parents described how hidden the practice is. One parent spoke for the first time of her ordeal. She described the pain, the shock, the huge loss of blood and the trauma that has stayed with her:

"I *remember everything, I thought it was going to be something special, I was told it was a celebration. I thought I was going to die it was so painful. I lost so much blood. I still wake up now thinking about it. I would never put my daughter through that*" (parent).

Other parents agreed they would do anything to prevent their daughters being put through this process. One middle aged woman explained that she cannot return to her country because she would be made to go through this procedure.

"*It is a huge black cloud over my head, not to have gone through this procedure has brought great shame on my family. If I go back, I will not be accepted until I have this done to me. I will never go back for this reason and am terrified I will be sent back*" (parent).

FGM is usually carried out on girls before they reach puberty. Student participants were especially dismayed to discover that FGM would be performed on an adult. We discussed current legislation which protects women and girls and the importance of practitioners having knowledge and cultural awareness to intervene. A scenario was outlined whereby social workers could support women if they were concerned. This proved to be a constructive exercise which helped to change parents' perspectives of social workers wanting to take their children away, to wanting to support them with keeping their family together instead. Students expressed how increased understanding and support is key to mending gaps.

"We *have not covered this topic on our course which really worries me as social workers we need to have FGM on our radar. Hearing from women today has helped me to understand how important it is to be open and honest with people as it feels like there is such a lack of trust, we have to build relationships and trust so that people know we are there to help them especially in a crisis*" (student).

We found that gaps could be mended by social workers making links with community leaders and organisations supporting the refugee and asylum seeker community. Working together would ensure that cross cultural perspectives are shared. Gaps need to be mended with men in the community, many of whom support the practice. A strategy for mending gaps is required to promote awareness that ensure the practice is banned; also, that illegal and abusive practice is reported.

As described in chapter three I was particularly concerned about how women were left feeling having talked about their experiences in some cases for the first time. By checking they had the support they might need with this I discovered how profoundly empowering they had found this session to be. Indeed, the idea for a writing project was borne from this discussion, an important outcome that I shall return to.

(iii)   Education.

An education advisor joined this session to discuss parents' rights in relation to education for their children and themselves. Parents knew children were entitled to education from the age of three but were less sure about the age when education became compulsory, which is five. Parents were unaware they had any choice about which school to send their child to and were informed about Ofsted, providing guidance to parents based on school inspection reports, (Gov.uk, 2021). Access to schools can limit choices and raise issues with transport for which there is some funding available. One example was shared where a mother of a child with learning disabilities had to walk her child to the school each day: an hour each way. As this school provided the right environment to meet her child's needs better than her local school, she had requested funding for transport. She was told there was none available, however the resources taken up with staff and interpreter time to meet and discuss this on several occasions outweighed the cost of transport. Parents learned how social workers can support them with talking about their concerns about their child, for example, learning difficulties and emotional well- being.

Adults need to be in the UK for six months before they can attend formal English classes. This is a long time for people who feel they need to learn the language as quickly and intensively as possible. Bridging this gap, IPC offers English classes to parents on arrival. There are many barriers facing adults accessing education because of immigration status. The main obstacle is that 'asylum seekers are not usually eligible for student finance' (the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service/ UCAS 2020). Information was shared about the increasing number of universities offering scholarships to refugees and asylum seekers, which presented some new possibilities for parents hearing about this for the first time. The impact of parents having nothing to do came as quite a surprise for some students:

"I am so shocked to hear that people have to wait so long to learn English and that they cannot attend college or have access to a computer to do anything. It is like the state is compounding their mental health problems, you can see how easy it would be to promote positive mental health by supporting people with things]to do. People aren't allowed to work, what they expect people to do all day…apart from go out of their mind…?" (Student)

Participants exchanged their cultural experiences of education which included hearing about compulsory attendance at military college for men and women in Eritrea. Learning how Eritrean adults are trained and prepared to fight for the first three months of higher education contrasted quite starkly with fresher's induction to university life. Parents expressed how much more confident they felt by knowing how to navigate education systems.

We found that gaps could be mended by accessing people arriving in the UK to an English class as soon as possible. This is the starting point for people to integrate in the community. Gaps in social policy limit people's life chances of higher education. All universities could offer scholarships to asylum seekers and refugees. Mending gaps in education leads to mending gaps with career choices, providing structure and purpose in people's lives and promotes well -being.

(iv) **Safeguarding**.

Fears expressed at the first meeting with parents, led to discussion about why parents were 'scared' of social workers. The only previous knowledge they had about social workers was that they removed children. Parents expressed feeling reluctant to ask for support or fear of

it being a sign of not coping which could trigger such drastic action. A social worker and a student delivered a presentation in which the legal framework for safeguarding was explained, focussing on the Children Act 1989 updated 2004 (Gov.uk, 2004), that underpins social work practice and sets out the duties and powers of the social worker and responsibilities of the local authority. Through exploring some examples where legislation applies and the concept of 'significant harm', parents had an improved understanding of the circumstances in which social workers would intervene.

It is important that parents in the community are aware of safeguarding legislation to prevent problems e.g., leaving young children at home alone. An example was shared of a woman who went out to buy milk and returned to find social services and the police in her home. Her children were removed whilst her situation was investigated as it was considered that she had left them alone too young. In her own country this would have been culturally acceptable, but she did not know this could raise a concern leading to state intervention in the UK. Her children were returned when the investigation was concluded however the distress caused by separation had a lasting impact and fuelled community distrust in social workers.

Parents described experiences where they had felt 'judged' by professionals and contrasted this with how different it felt within the project, when professionals who took the time to listen to them and build relationships:

"My *children go to school with not one speck of dirt on their clothes, I make sure of that. My biggest fear is because of where I live and my status, have no money, I am judged not to be a good parent. If social workers came to talk with us in the community centre and get to know us like here, I would feel much better. Before I was too scared of what social workers would think about me, now by getting to know each other I am no longer scared* "(parent).

There was lots of expression of 'fear' and 'judgement' throughout the dialogue which presented an opportunity to explain key social work values based on principles of 'respect' 'dignity' and being 'non-judgemental'. This is what parents experienced in the group.

We found that gaps could be mended by social workers working with community leaders to meet with parents, sharing information and advice about social work support. By imparting knowledge about the legal framework, difficult situations could be avoided.

(v)   Finance:

Gaps were highlighted in relation to cash and card payment arrangements. Everyone was in receipt of the same allowance of £39.60 per week, but there were differences between individual asylum claim routes where some people were paid in cash and others on a card. Parents agreed that cash was much better. One parent described how her daughter needed cash for after school activities and a school trip. As she could not access this, her daughter missed out.

We found that gaps could be mended by removing the different treatment of people between asylum routes to enable everyone to receive cash not card payments. This could help to mend other gaps such as children being able to access school clubs and trips. Finance and accommodation were the main themes which impacted upon people's day to day lives.

(vi)   <u>Housing</u>

Gaps with living arrangements were discussed in all sessions and identified as a major source of stress and problems for parents, summarised as follows:

- Sixty women were living between two hostels, each with one room which they shared with their child/children under five. There was a shared kitchen on each floor.

- The housing provider could have been more thoughtful about placing people alongside each other, different cultures and practices were not considered, women felt as they were treated as one homogenous group.

- One parent described how she and her school age child were kept awake by a parent and toddler in the next room who stayed up all night and slept during the day.

- One parent shared a photograph of a mattress upright against a wall. She had requested an additional bed as she could no longer expect her growing children to share a child bed, the mattress was provided but the room was too small to put it on the floor.

- Parents described how fights regularly broke out in the kitchens which were very cramped, as everyone needed to use them to feed their children at the same time. Some clashes could have been avoided if thought had gone into matching people

with same cultures. For example, cooking certain meats in certain ways can be offensive to one culture and acceptable to another.

- Facilities were extremely limited, when an appliance broke it was reported and took a very long time for a response to be made, usually not at all.
- The landlord arranged for unannounced spot checks on parents' rooms which made people feel permanently unsafe and that they had no privacy whatsoever.

The overall sense of hopelessness was summed up:

"*Nothing happens, nothing changes, no-one intervenes and helps.*" (Parent)

We identified through dialogue that whilst housing provision is made on a 'no choice' basis, this does not mean that parents do not have any rights. Housing provision within The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 entitles people to accommodation if they don't have any. (If under 18, the local authority provides.) Although people are entitled to request re location if the property is unsuitable or if there are medical or other reasons requiring this, parents stated that they never received a response to such requests. Social workers are best placed to support parents with understanding and gaining their rights and they are best placed to challenge housing policy that stipulates that people should receive fair treatment'. As one parent stated:

"*Social workers need to find the right information and use their power to help those with no power*". (Parent)

How social workers use power is a key ethical concern. It is widely accepted that the effectiveness of social work practice is predicated on the enhancement of power resources of the service user (Hasenfield, 1987, Beresford, 2002, Smith, 2010). The parent's quote above encapsulates the focus of a wide range of strategies for empowering those in receipt of support. The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) Code of ethics (2012, 2014) specifies that:

'Social workers should promote and contribute to the development of positive policies, procedure and practices which are anti-oppressive and empowering'. (BASW, 2014, 3.7)

Sharing this principle aim with participants promoted dialogue based on their experiences of feeling excluded from policies and decisions that impacted directly upon them. As identified

in Chapter one, Smith (2010) finds that relational power is key to working collaboratively with service users, particularly in situations of 'risk'. The need to mend gaps in people's living arrangements was a high priority. Through problem solving together, participants built on their relational power and identified an opportunity that became the biggest gap to be mended. At the time the project was underway G4S had a national Government contract to provide housing to asylum seekers which they subcontracted to private landlords. Both G4S and the subcontracted landlord in the Northeast were named in the Times article (Norfolk, 2016) highlighted in Chapter three. Via the local migration support service, we connected with the Home Office who were undertaking a timely review of guidance on accommodation as well as Home Office guidance on asylum seeker life in the UK. Parents were invited to inform their updated reports, as it was explained that the decision had been taken to end the national Government contract with G4S which opened the opportunity to discuss new local provider arrangements with Mend the Gap participants. Parent's voices informed conversations about who could take this on in the region. It was a significant opportunity for them to be listened to. A new local provider was identified, and all women were moved into single family accommodation, one house, not room, per family.

This outcome demonstrates how the biggest gaps can be mended when people come together to share their lived experiences. Meeting with the Home Office, we were reminded that their guidance makes many positive efforts to ensure people have access to suitable accommodation, exercise their rights to fair treatment and have their complaints resolved within reasonable periods of time. However, parents themselves were able to explain that the main gap is the difference between the intentions and promises of guidance and their experiences. The Home Office listened to parents' experiences and new solutions were found. We agreed that mending gaps with policy makers is an essential way forward for improving outcomes for the most marginalised people in our society.

The single male parent in the group strongly echoed this point:

"*The biggest gaps are with policy makers; they are the people who need to come on Mend the Gap programmes. They need to listen much more to people's experiences to see how their policies don't work and how much struggle people have in their lives*" (parent).

It should be clarified that this male parent was not re housed and was already in single family accommodation. Other outcomes from the project will be addressed shortly.

4.3.6. Project Evaluation

We discussed how to evaluate the learning in relation to T-PE and shared headings from the previous project evaluation. Participants agreed that these headings reflected the topics they would like to provide feedback on at an individual level and share as a group. As before, we made a brief recorded evaluation of participants' experiences (appendix nine)

At an individual level, participants reflected upon the following questions, a flavour of responses are presented below:

1. **What were your expectations of taking part in the programme – were they met or unmet?**

All participants described their expectations as being exceeded. Parents said they had felt so scared of meeting social workers they did not know what to expect. Social workers/students stated that they had not expected so much that was new to them which was entirely due to learning directly from parents' experiences.

"I found out about a lot of issues I had previously not considered, I thought I knew a lot about different cultures, so I did not expect to learn as much as I did. Learning from people's experiences is infinitely better than learning form lectures and books" (student)

"I was able to give my own views, find answers to my worries and now I know where to go for help. I have made new friends and have more opportunities to meet up with other parents which is nice" (parent)

2. **Did you hold any views at the beginning of the programme that have since changed?**

A range of examples were shared which demonstrated how parents felt less 'scared' of social workers and more open to seeking help. Students mostly identified the impact of social media which meant their views of asylum seekers were inaccurate and even disrespectful. Some participants recognised how some of their own personal values were discriminatory.

"I always felt there was not a platform to say what I want and to learn from different cultures. My views about LGBT have changed because of this programme. I realise how I learned this from my parents. I no longer believe being gay is wrong and I will teach my children that". (Parent)

"I used to believe that people came to this country because they thought they would get better housing, more chance of money and work. I didn't understand about all the conflict in their countries because we don't study that on our course. I now feel sad to know that really people would rather be in their home country, they just want a safe life together with their families". (Student)

3. **Has taking part in a gap mending programme helped you to have a better understanding of; systems and services in the UK /professional roles/ your own values and beliefs/different cultural perspectives/anything else?**

Parents highlighted how much better they felt about professional support being there to support them and having a better understanding of UK law. Students emphasised the benefits of learning from experience.

"The weekly sessions offered a window into the daily trials and tribulations of what it is like to be an 'asylum seeker' and all the uncertainty that comes with that title. It was made abundantly clear that not only did they have to deal with the discourse around the label of 'asylum seeker' but also with culturally insensitive housing not fit for purpose, severely restricted budgets, the legacies of escaping their homelands (with the trauma of conflict as well as leaving families behind) as well as having issues around communication as some struggled with their English. I found myself learning lots of new facts about the issues that had led them to come to Britain. (Student)

"I have found out more about my rights from this project. I never heard about these before, it has been helpful to find out more about different people's jobs and where I can go for support. It is really important for parents to understand UK law, so we don't make mistakes." (Parent)

4. **Can you identify any examples which demonstrate the benefits of participating in the gap mending project?**

Examples shared illustrated the diverse ways in which people learned together, building relationships and trust. The main points identified by parents highlighted the importance of empowering social work practice. Students emphasised the importance of having cultural knowledge and how learning from parents helped develop their skills as culturally sensitive practitioners.

"Parents sharing their experiences has provided excellent examples to improve knowledge and understanding of different cultures and best practice as a social worker. I now appreciate that not everyone understands as social workers and other different professional roles and how we can help people ". (Student)

"I *have learned that everyone has rights. As an asylum seeker you are made to feel you have no rights. Everyone says negative things all the time. I have learned through this programme that we have rights and we have power; social workers are there to help us to find this*" (Parent)

5. **What do you think are the most important things to come from this project?**
Participants identified the benefits of discussing different themes. Parents expressed how important it was to talk about difficult issues, in most cases for the first time. Students identified the significance of new learning through building trust and relationships with parents.

"Getting to know each other and building positive relationships has been the best part as it shows parents how it is possible to work together, social work is all about partnership working but we don't get opportunities like this to learn how to do it well" (student)

"It has been most helpful to talk about mental health and FGM, these are subjects that are very secret and hidden in asylum seeker families. It has also been good to change the way students learn. They have learned from us which will help them prepare for practice" (parent)

6. **Would you be interested to be involved with further developments and activities**?
All participants said they would. The shared decision to establish a 'drop in' support group was one which everyone was committed to developing and supporting. Some parents said they were very keen to finish writing a book chapter. Social workers/ students highlighted

the importance of sharing their experience of Mend the Gap with other students, lecturers and social workers as a model for development within education and practice. As with the previous project, for the first time the group divided between students and parents to discuss and feedback their messages to each other .

Group Feedback.

If you could give one key message to students/young people, what would it be?

Parents delivered their messages to students which highlighted how they no longer feared social workers. The single male perspective highlighted how more gaps need to be mended with men**:**

"I *know I am not the only one to say, I am no longer scared of social workers. Before coming on this course, I really feared social workers and other professionals. Now I understand the differences in people's roles and especially learning about social work values, how social workers are not there to judge me. They are there to help*".

"*Please don't forget about the men. Men are often ignored; they feel invisible as professionals always focus on women when dealing with children. I know men who have taken their lives because they have felt so invisible. Men find it even harder to talk about mental health which means social workers have to work harder to reach them*".

Students delivered their messages to parents which highlighted the value of learning from experience:

"*Thank you so much for sharing your experiences. As a student I have learned so much more than I could from a book. Learning together has been the most valuable learning experience learning together*"

"*I feel my whole outlook has changed from learning alongside parents. I will approach things in the future with a much better understanding of why people's experiences are so important to working together and why it is so important to make links with community leaders*".

All feedback was shared so that as a group, key gaps and messages were evaluated providing an overall evaluation of learning for the group. The main themes that participants identified as central to supporting and working in partnership with parents were:

- Rights: gaps could be mended by social workers having good knowledge of human rights and making parents aware of their rights to access support and services beyond 'no recourse to public funds'.
- Values: gaps could be mended by social workers having knowledge of different cultural values and being aware of their own western values.
- Information: gaps could be mended by social workers sharing all relevant information with parents.
- Communication: gaps could be mended by social workers ensuring that parents have access to English classes as soon as possible, interpreter support and information in their own language.

4.3.7 Project outcomes

The most significant unanticipated outcome from the project whereby parents mended the gaps with the Home Office and were moved to suitable single-family accommodation, has been mentioned. Having such a significant impact upon participants, reporting this could not be left until the end of this section.

Another key outcome of this project came through the T-PE process which led to identifying the need for a 'Mend the Gap' drop - in to be established. The aim of the drop- in was to create a space where parents could continue to meet. A social worker in the group offered to support this with potential for other social workers to join. This extended the social worker's role in the community to ensure that asylum seeker parents could find information and support.

The writing project that was initiated primarily from the dialogue around FGM and from discussing other gaps in knowledge and support continued. As introduced in Chapter one, I was involved in co-editing a book which provided an opportunity for participants to contribute their own chapter. A small group of parents and one student wanted to meet after the project ended to complete this. The chapter to which parents gave the title of

'Why Parents are Afraid of Social Workers' (Abdulla et al, 2021 in McLaughlin et al, pp.94-100) demonstrates the co-impact of the project as it is widely available to universities internationally. Parents had the opportunity to participate in an international webinar for the book launch. Most significantly, by being recognised - as authors in the book, they are - being valued and listened to as authors of their experiences from which professionals have much to learn.

The final session was a celebration event with certificates presented by the local Migration Partnership Officer where the film produced by participants was premiered. It was notable that whilst this session marked the end of the participatory learning project, the atmosphere was buzzing with chat planning the new 'drop in'. As co-researchers, we shared our feelings that this was the start of an important learning journey for everyone.

A students' reflection contributed after the final session makes this point:

"I *felt really sad about the project ending, I felt very emotional on the day of the celebration thinking about what a gap there would be in our weeks ahead when we usually meet on Wednesdays. That made me appreciate how close we had come in our relationships. It felt like parting with friends. However, on the day it did not feel sad, people were happy to celebrate their valuable contributions and learning. It was great to see parents looking so happy and talking about the future. That's when I realised, we had mended the most important gaps."*

The overall key findings and conclusions are drawn together through reflexive thematic analysis method in Section two. The final project is presented next.

4.3.8. Mending Gaps with disabled adults.

This project was identified by a newly formed service user led organisation, – 'Empowerment Consultancy and Training' (ECT). The impact of austerity has meant that many service user- led organisations have had funding taken away which has left disabled people without vital support. Recent research conducted by Shaping Our Lives (SOL), a national service user led network for disabled people, has reported deleting one hundred and twenty-four user-led groups from its network since 2016 (Meakin and Yiannoullou,

2019). ECT have responded to support needed within a local community where disabled people have themselves suffered significant cuts and reduction to funding. The UK's equality and human rights bodies have warned that; 'Disabled people are being increasingly marginalised and shut out of society, as they bear the brunt of Government spending cuts.' (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2017)

As introduced in Chapter one, ECT found that disabled people were becoming increasingly isolated and saw a deterioration in people's mental health suffering. They said they wanted to bring people together to try to mend gaps, 'before it was too late'. The purpose identified for the first voluntary meeting with potential participants was to identify gaps and barriers facing disabled people with accessing Social Support Services.

Nine disabled people attended the first meeting, which for some was the first time they had been out of the house for a very long time. One person talked about not leaving his house for over a year. Some people had personal assistant (PA) support. One person had an epileptic seizure during our meeting which she explained is unfortunately a frequent occurrence due to her condition. She was supported by her carer and returned to the discussion half an hour later distressed and apologetic which of course she had no reason to be at all. She explained how she manages her condition and how it can come on suddenly and that it always leaves her feeling upset and exhausted. I think she was reading the concerned expression on my face when she said:

"*Don't worry, I won't miss this, it is the most important opportunity I have had to share my experiences with professionals. People need to know what my life is like so they can learn what disabled people really need not what they think disabled people need*".

These words rang out so loudly in a later session when a social worker stated:

"The *problem that I am learning from Mend the Gap is that social workers think they know what people need when they don't. This is because we are under pressure of resources and told not to spend anything. Budgets are the wrong place to start. We need to start with what people tell us they need and then fight for budgets*".

Without getting into the content of sessions just yet, this connection is made here as it reinforces the important message the participant was pinning down right from the start. It

was explained how disabled people face struggles every day. This was pointed out as I was trying to find mugs that were easier to hold than take away cups to provide refreshments for our meeting.

Gaps that were identified at our first meeting were with:

- Power.
- Disability and mental health.
- Housing Services
- Understanding Benefit Systems and Financial Awareness
- Community Safety.

As all gaps related to support services, people were very keen to involve social workers as well as students to share the dialogue. As one co-facilitator observed:

"We have worked well with students; students make time to get to know people. Then like a light switching off, they completely change when they qualify. It is like they get sucked in by the system and they are completely different, they don't have the time anymore".

This marked a difference between participants experience of social work education in this project from the previous two. Half of the disabled adults had prior experience of contributing to classroom-based education through co-teaching, presenting their 'story', interviewing students and involvement in communications skills assessments. Also, through meeting social work students on placements. As NESWA supported the project with resources, we were offered a room within the city centre council offices. Service user participants explained that they were very used to coming to the building and said they had asked for the use of rooms to meet up in previously but never succeeded. This felt like a big step forward to be locating the project in a significant mainstream building in the region, especially because this meant many social workers were based there and would only have to travel from their desks to participate in the project. It was very exciting on the first day to see the usual noticeboard at reception feature 'Mend the Gap' in the list of other meetings. Four qualified social workers came along to the introductory session along with eight social work students.

As with previous projects, ethical principles for research and working together were addressed. Participatory research was explained with the first meeting with disabled adults. As with the parents' programme, some people said they were happy to take a co-facilitator role (again, the preference for 'co- facilitator' was made over 'co-researcher'), and some people wanted to participate without feeling they carried too much responsibility. Given the context where some people were experiencing mental health distress and isolation, I understood that they may have felt anxious about committing to something that they may not have felt up to. Although the principles of participatory action research apply to all participants, I think the most important principle is to offer the opportunity as an option rather than expectation.

At the introductory session, 'Power' was identified as a key gap in relations between professionals and people receiving services, which became a theme for all sessions .The notable shift in power with qualified social workers in the room when all participants came together for the first time was positively observed:

'*Already the big difference with this programme is that we have never been offered the opportunity to work in partnership with practising Social Workers. This is a very big shift in power*.' (Disabled participant).

This point was made specifically in relation to participants' experiences of involvement in social workers continuing professional development, rather than the direct relationship between service user and social worker.

As with the previous projects, participants met for eight weeks. The second session for disabled participants was the first full meeting with social workers and students where principles of research, including consent and confidentiality and data were thoroughly addressed. As noted earlier, I felt particularly sensitive to disabled participants' mental health, especially as some people had stated they did not want to share responsibility for what they felt would be co-leadership of the group. Revisiting the principles of Mend the

Gap and PAR, was important to build trust and confidence in the group processes whilst being sensitive not to convey pressure of expectations.

As before, each session is summarised to identify key gaps and recommendations for mending them.

(i)   Power.

In contrast to the previous ways the introductory session commenced with a brief introduction by participants, an 'ice breaker' task was developed by the disabled co-facilitators. The task required everyone to draw themselves and identify people - who influenced decisions about them and their life. Discussion was generated about times when people experienced an imbalance of power in any of the relationships noted and where, in these contexts, there were gaps, they would like to see mended. What was most striking was how long the lists produced by disabled participants were, in contrast to those produced by non -disabled - participants. This exercise was a constructive way of promoting self- awareness of privileges held by the latter group. Acknowledging this helped the former group to express themselves.

By way of example:

Disabled participant; parents, social worker, G.P, nurse, OT, council worker, Personal Assistant, care agency, job centre, DWP, wheelchair service.

Student participant; G.P., Family, friends, University lecturer, practice educator.

Social worker participant; family, line manager, G.P.

Dialogue involved sharing experiences of gaps in the power relations as a recipient of a service or support, in relation to those in a professional role. This included focus on what it felt like to be 'recipients' of a service and the important role social workers played in their

lives to receive the level of support needed. Personal experiences were shared of how disabled people rely upon on Social Work Assessments. People expressed their 'fears of losing hours from their care packages', 'the stress', and 'the need to justify their needs on an annual basis'. Some participants shared how it feels to have to talk about one's most intimate care needs and have these reduced to on average, fifteen-minute time periods.

"I know that I need one and a half hours a day for a shower, shave and dressing. I don't feel like I should have to go through the details of everything I need to justify this time. We are experts on our own experiences. Social workers have all the power as they can say 'no'".

(Disabled participant).

As social workers/students considered their own shower and routines, all agreed that fifteen minutes was very limiting.

A range of examples were shared in the first session which social worker participants said they found quite difficult to hear about. They explained how they prioritised person - centred care, yet struggled with restricted budgets, that they could see people needed. Disabled participants said they acknowledged the important role they had in their lives to provide appropriate levels of support. To me, this highlighted ethical issues which I shall now summarise. It also led me to reflect on how the ice breaker had started to address people's identity in relation to who holds power in people's lives; this being an important starting point for transcending boundaries within the relationship between professionals and those in receipt of services.

Ethical issues were raised in discussing how some people were impacted by receiving lower levels of care than they felt they needed. One woman described how her intimate personal care needs are met according to a care agency timetable rather than her personal needs. Some strong emotions in the group were evoked as she described her personal discomfort which she had come to accept as something she had to endure. Interestingly one social worker offered to take action to talk with her care provider. As researcher I held responsibility and was prepared to act where I had ethical concerns about someone's well-being. However, the social worker was quick to respond by offering to follow this up, which I experienced as sharing responsibility for the group's well-being. The participant explained how her own social worker had raised this with the care provider on a regular basis. Further

she explained that the removal of her Independent Living fund had left her with two options; 'to stay at home with limited funding or move into residential care'. She was very clear about her choice:

"*I want the right to live in my own home. I don't think I should be told that is too expensive, that makes me feel as a disabled person my life is not worth living.*"

This point shared by many disabled people has been summarised by Linda Burnip, the co-founder of the campaign group Disabled People Against Cuts:

"*These cuts are rolling the right to independent living back years*" (in Butler,2016,p.1).

By sharing her personal experience, the participant said how important it was to her that people understood how difficult her life was. She hoped this could improve knowledge and understanding and 'help social workers be better at their jobs'. Participants shared how beneficial it was to have learned about how 'Disabled People Against Cuts' actively campaign for human rights. Participants explored together what actions they could take, to promote human rights and social justice collectively .The key phrase highlighted in Chapter two; 'nothing about us without us', was aptly aligned with this discussion.

Those contributing examples from their lived experiences were careful to remind social work participants that the scenarios were shared as examples of power misuse and how it felt to be disempowered, whether intentional or not. It seemed to me that the suggestion here was that they did not wish to personally criticise or offend social workers who were trying their best, as described earlier, in a climate of restricted budgets. They held an awareness of taking care of the social work participants, reciprocating the concern social work participants had conveyed.

We found that gaps could be mended by:

- Social workers having a more active role with promoting and supporting disabled people's rights.
- Attending to the balance of power between disabled people and social workers which is essential to building positive relationships.
- Social workers advocating for people's rights, regardless of budget restrictions.

This first session with a focus on power felt important to all project sessions. Participants frequently talked about becoming more aware of their power as relationships developed over subsequent weeks.

(ii)   Disability and Mental Health

The language and terminology of disability and mental health was explored through reviewing the medical and social models of disability. This begun with reviewing language and terminology, as disabled participants pointed out how often they hear social workers perpetuate medical model language by talking about 'people with disabilities'. The key messages, (that have been explored in the literature review, Oliver, 1990, Cameron, 2014, chapter two) about the significance of language that promotes an oppressive relationship were conveyed.

As the co-facilitators were used to delivering disability equality awareness on professional education courses, they slipped too easily into lecture style delivery. Recognising this was not the right approach to sharing dialogue, we broke into small groups to share different experiences.

Exploring new perspectives on assessments, it became clear that mental health awareness was distinctly lacking. Experiences of these were entirely based on the practicalities of disability support requirements. One person shared how his mental health had deteriorated so badly that he could not physically move which was assessed as reduced mobility. As he became involved in a support network, that encouraged him to get out of the house, his physical health improved. As introduced in chapter one, 'The Great Escape' initiative was established to give people a reason to escape their home and meet up with others. This aptly named group demonstrated very clearly the social isolation people were experiencing. Social workers discussed the intention to take a whole- person approach to assessments, yet they agreed that people's needs were segregated according to services they were allocated:

"We are taught about holistic assessments and mental health cuts across everything, but when you are allocated to assess a disabled person, particularly when you are told there is no budget to allocate, we probably miss things." (Social worker participant)

The benefit of service user led support in the community was discovered for the first time by most social work participants, who had not had any contact with such services. This was quite a revelation to me having trained as a social worker in the 1990's when the development of advocacy organisations such as UKAN (United Kingdom Advocacy Network 1990, Dalton and Carlin, 2002), promoted the value of people's voices being independently heard, individually and collectively. Subsequently, the principles of involvement in 'user centred care' were enshrined in legislation (Faulkner et al, 2015). The absence of service user led –organisations was identified as a significant gap in current support provision. The region in which the project was located, was well known for previously having a high number of service user led services, particularly with advocacy support services for disabled people. All such services had closed before this generation of social workers had the benefit of working in partnership with them. The national network of service users and disabled people, 'Shaping Our Lives' (SOL), has highlighted the loss of knowledge, peer support opportunities and advocacy through the disappearance of ULO's' (User Led Organisations) (Meakin and Yiannoullou, 2019 p,1). Their research reveals that one hundred and fifty-eight user-led organisations had closed during 2016/2017. I would expect this figure to have risen since then which is a worrying trend, particularly as the World Health Organisation (2010) found that for many people, being involved in a user – led group meant overcoming a 'state of powerlessness' (Meakin and Yiannoullou, 2019 p.2). It was explained that such services were vital to support people with challenging decisions that denied them their rights. Social workers observed that they were 'struggling to know where to refer people. One disabled participant illustrated how she could have benefitted from independent advocacy support, describing how 'panicked' she would get in the days building up to meeting with her social worker:

"I know I am going to be grilled and I don't feel I have the tools to defend myself."

In a context of preparing for her own review, social workers expressed how sad they felt hearing that she could feel like that. As confidence and relationships developed, disabled participants were notably talking more about feeling better equipped to challenge. Some focus was placed on the Care Act (2014) and Equality Act (2010) to ensure that disabled people knew what this legislation meant to them and how they could have access to independent advocacy. As more examples of putting the act and support entitlements into practice were shared one student commented on the complexity of the topic:

"I struggle with understanding the law but when it is taught from people's own experiences of using it, it is much easier to understand because it brings it to life. "

This prompts me to point out that Mend the Gap programmes prior to this research, attracted some criminology students who made very similar points about the impact of learning from putting 'the law into practice of people's lives' as they described it. Emphasis was placed upon learning from people's experience, rather than exclusively through the medium of a lecture or textbook.

We found that gaps could be mended by:

- Social workers promoting social model language that affirms and includes disabled people as equal within community life.
- Social work students having a good understanding of the background to service user led organisations and the vital role they have in the community.
- Increasing funding to service user led organisations and social work placements opportunities.
- Ensuring disabled people knew about their rights to independent advocacy support.
- Including mental health and emotional well- being within assessments.

(iii) Housing

Accommodation was a key feature of dialogue as this was central to people's ability to live as independently as possible. As noted earlier, fears were expressed about budgets being cut so severely that people may not be able to stay in their own homes. Notably, no disabled participants owned their own homes, all living in local authority or housing association accommodation. This fits with the national picture of disabled people being less likely than non-disabled people to own their own home (Office for National Statistics, (ONS) 2019). A range of gaps were identified with housing support services:

- Effective assessment processes for the correct adaptations
- Maintaining and renewing adaptations (addressing differences in support between Council services and Housing Association services.)
- Social isolation and personal safety
- Neighbourhood disputes
- Financial support (covering Housing Benefit, Council Tax and Universal Credit)

A housing officer was invited to join the dialogue from the Local Authority Housing organisation. A representative from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) who was invited to a later session asked if she could join this session to get a better understanding of the issues people faced. The DWP representative subsequently attended all remaining sessions. One participant shared his experience of his garden fence blowing over which he explained, as a disabled man he could not repair. He kept phoning the council, 'getting fobbed off and passed from one department to another'. This had gone on for two years, resulting in fallouts with his neighbour which impacted on his in confidence:

"*I stopped opening the curtains then I stopped going outside altogether until I was persuaded to join the Great Escape*".

Through sharing this experience with the housing officer, repairs to his fence were promptly arranged. He returned to the sessions enthusing about how he was able to sit in his greenhouse again and tend to his plants without feeling overlooked. Most importantly as there were many disabled people in need of fences and other property repairs, the housing

officer suggested ECT forward a list of contacts where disabled people needed a response. Mending this gap between the Housing department and service user led organisation was a significant step with providing vital support for many people in the community, ameliorating mental health and wellbeing as well as practically improving accommodation.

We found that gaps could be mended by:

- Social workers linking with housing providers to ensure people get timely support.
- Improved inter-professional communication inclusive of service user led organisations, enhancing support to individuals.
- Professionals having improved knowledge and understanding of the impact of delays with responding to housing concerns on disabled people's mental health and wellbeing.

(iv) Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

For this session we had a representative from the Department of Work and Pensions present to answer questions and 'dispel myths' she heard during the previous meeting where we had discussed Housing Support. People expressed having ' big fears' when it came to talking to people from the DWP, explaining that as with Social Work Assessments, they always felt uneasy, as though they were being judged whenever they were asking for help. Some people shared their anger and stories of people they knew who had become very ill through suffering over a lack of finance. Key gaps identified were:

- Barriers to disabled people seeking Employment Support
- Understanding and fears of Benefit Systems (particularly Universal Credit).

The DWP professional explained that she had wanted to make links with people in the community, to get out and talk with people, but didn't know how to. This illustrated a clear gap between people working in DWP offices distant from the field, who really needed to spend time with people, finding out about their circumstances and the impact of their decision making on their lives. The relatively recent case of Errol Graham, a disabled man who starved to death after the DWP stopped his benefits, has mobilised a campaign that symbolises some of the stories that people shared. (Butler, 2020).

One participant explained:

"*I don't know how families manage, as a single person I have had my benefits and support cut back so much, if it wasn't for the local foodbank and friends, I would not be here*".

Another participant shared his recent experience where he was losing a job and asking for support from the DWP.

"I *was unable to access support in setting up a new business because I was not in employment, and although I was setting up a business, I could not apply for Access to Work without having a three-year business plan, which I would struggle to write without a personal assistant to support me, which I did not have funding for. The most infuriating aspect, going round in circles with this at the job centre, was when they asked me to inform them when I found the answers*".

This example demonstrates why many disabled people would not feel confident in gaining the support they need with entering the workplace.

Disabled participants expressed lots of fears over the 'Universal Credit system', introduced in 2013, (Gov.uk, 2015), which was still being implemented. They explained how worried they were about missing rent and tax payments, and how universal credit was putting more responsibility onto individuals. The DWP explained how urgent payments and other systems were in place to help those who found it difficult to manage their finances.

It was interesting to reflect on changes with the social worker's role in finance. Where social workers used to assess people's finance, that task is now passed on to the financial assessment team. Disabled participants expressed bewilderment about having had positive experiences where social workers explained their financial decisions, reduced to faceless bureaucratic letters accounting for a reduction to their support. It would be nice to think that the rationale for this was one of valuing prioritising time for social workers to undertake therapeutic based work. However, this shift was directly related to the move towards a market- based model of service provision, whereby the commercial sector undertakes the predominant role in providing social care services. This coincided with the adoption of the 'care manager 'approach which fundamentally changed social workers' role becoming gatekeeper to resources (Beresford, 2007, p.25). One example was shared of how

a social worker was previously more involved in 'helping people have their needs met, taking on more of an advocate role', compared with how it is now, 'focussed more on the safeguarding role and is more restricted by budgets'.

As one person advocated:

"*As service users we want social workers to focus their assessments on what a person needs and wants and to advocate for them. Leave the budgeting to someone else but make sure people get what they deserve and don't tell people they don't deserve it by going into long explanations about cuts*".

One social worker described her role as 'being between a rock and a hard place' drawing this on a sheet of paper as she spoke. This pictorial representation became a shared symbol for the group, conveying empathy between people with lived experiences and social workers.

Participants agreed that experiencing face to face dialogue with the DWP representative and being listened to, had a positive impact even though they did not have huge confidence in changing systems. This resonates with Beresford's (2007) findings that:

"*Service users, in consultations, have frequently drawn a distinction between individual practitioners working with them, for whom they often have praise and the statutory organisations in which they work about which they are highly critical*" (p. 22).

One participant who had been uncertain about attending the meeting due experiencing mental health distress that he felt was entirely caused by '*past relationships and bad experiences with DWP*', thanked the representative 'for being open to such challenging dialogue'. With both the housing and DWP discussions, social workers and students said they felt gaps had been mended in understanding how to think more holistically about individual needs. As one student stated:

"Listening *to and feeling people's emotions is a completely different experience to reading a report or book. When I am doing Care assessments I will be thinking about the people in this room and what they have taught me* ".

We found that gaps could be mended by:

- Having more clear information about finance procedures, especially with accessing emergency payments.
- DWP staff connecting with service user led organisations to increase knowledge and understanding of people's lived experience
- Disability awareness and mental health training for DWP staff.
- Social workers advocating for service users rather than their institution.

(v) Community Safety

It was unfortunate that we could not identify a community safety team representative to join this dialogue which was due to lack of availability on the day rather than a lack of interest. Discussions throughout the project had highlighted how some people felt unsafe or vulnerable, yet when 'Disability Hate Crime' was introduced, some people said they had not really understood what this meant in relation to their own experiences. For example, 'accepting that name calling is part of being disabled'. Sharing the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS, 2020), definition of hate crime opened dialogue:

"*The term 'hate crime' can be used to describe a range of criminal behaviour where the perpetrator is motivated by hostility or demonstrates hostility towards the victim's disability, race, religion, sexual orientation or transgender identity. These aspects of a person's identify are known as 'protected characteristics'. A hate crime can include verbal abuse, intimidation, threats, harassment, assault and bullying, as well as damage to property. The perpetrator can also be a friend, carer or acquaintance who exploits their relationship with the victim for financial gain or some other criminal purpose.*"

Seeing verbal abuse as a hate crime from which people had legal protection, was quite a revelation for some participants. Experiences where shared; some where people had very clearly experienced hate crime and some where people were questioning experiences in the context of hate crime for the first time. Disabled participants reflected together how generally their lives were framed within a context of living with hate crime. For example, many people had experienced feeling unsafe using a mobile phone outside for fear of being mugged. Social workers and students shared some of their own experiences. One woman highlighted the intersectionality of her experiences of discrimination:

"You know I really identify with what you are saying about living with hate crime and I have not considered this before outside of racism. Listening to your experiences as disabled people fearing going out in what should be ordinary ways is very similar to black people's fear of experiencing racist attacks whilst just trying to live their lives. As a black child I was called names and thought that was part of being black. As a qualified social worker some service users have refused to let me in their house. We do not live in a white world or an able-bodied world, hate crime is real and we all have a responsibility to call it out."

To me this statement demonstrated how gaps can be mended between people in their roles. The distance between a black female social worker and white disabled male in receipt of support was reduced by this shared insight as a conversation between these two participants ensued. Indeed, I reflected upon this as a defining moment whereby a key contribution of my research was realised. It is this demonstration of how boundaries that maintain people in binary positions can be transcended. By learning together and building trust, people are more open to acknowledging their own vulnerabilities. Sharing lived experiences of discrimination in this way, changes the stereotypical image of a professional who is distanced from someone's experience and enables the person requiring support to see the person helping them in a more human way. Reflections from this session particularly highlighted the impact of hearing how participants found a human connection, through sharing their lived experiences. I shall return to this in the later discussion chapter (five).

We found that gaps could be mended by:

- Social workers and other professionals talking explicitly about hate crime, informing people of their rights, support and protection.
- Key organisations working in partnership with people with lived experiences to develop more awareness of prevention strategies and support required.

A key outcome from this session is identified shortly, following a summary of the Transformative project evaluation.

4.3.9 Project Evaluation.

The individual evaluations developed for the previous two projects were presented as an option for people to amend and use for this project. Another option was to co-produce new individual or collective evaluation forms. Participants decided against individual evaluations

in preference to discussing their experiences and learning collectively. Emphasis was placed on keeping with shared dialogue which had been most important throughout the sessions. Dividing into two groups, for the first-time separating disabled participants from social workers and students, evaluative feedback was shared. A short film was also made to convey participants' experiences of the project . A flavour of feedback is captured below.

Social workers and students to disabled participants.

 "*I learned from some service users when I was at Uni but nothing like this. One of the reasons I miss Uni is because as qualified social workers we don't get the opportunity to learn from services users. We learn from service users when we reflect on our work with people and interventions but that is not the same. This has been different because we have built relationships and learned together without being directly involved in people's lives, so it is non-threatening. This should continue as part of every social worker's CPD. Why does involvement stop when we qualify? I have not thought about that before taking part in this project which is the best training I have done since qualifying. All other CPD has been online*". (Social Worker)

"*We didn't have service user involvement on my course although I now know we should have. Mend the Gap should be mandatory training for social work students. I remember when we started you were all talking about co-production and I thought I should know about that because it is in the Care Act. The truth is we are not taught about how to do co-production in Uni, so we just do things with service users and call it that. Learning from disabled people here has taught me everything about co-production.*" (Social Worker)

Disabled participants to social workers/students

 "*I feel I have more confidence in future social workers after coming on this course. I have had very negative experiences and I must admit it made me feel quite angry and that is how I felt at the start of this course. However, getting to know all of you who are nice, good people who want to do a good job has softened how I feel about social workers. If social workers in the future learn like this, then I think they will do a much better job.*"

"It has been brilliant spending time with you all and getting to know you. I just wish we could repeat this project. There is a big gap between child and adult social work which I know too well from my own experience. I wish we could get more child and adult social workers together with managers and other professionals to mend gaps between them informed by young disabled adult experiences. Mine was terrible, going from lots of great care to almost nothing. I hate to think of that happening to other young people, but I know it does".

4.3.10 Project Outcomes

The main outcome of this project was the partnerships established between agencies with ECT. Valuing the experiences of disabled people and the role of a service user led organisation in the community was central to mending gaps. Funding was secured to run a six-week programme specifically around Disability Hate Crime. This new programme took a Mend the Gap approach, involving some of the Mend the Gap participants, Gateshead Community Safety Team, Northumbria Police, Victims First and representatives from the Crown Prosecution Service. ECT are now established as a Safe Reporting Centre in the region and facilitate Hate Crime Training for people with lived experiences and professionals.

Through establishing relationships with the local housing provider and DWP representatives, communication via ECT continued beyond the project to ensure that other disabled people's concerns were addressed. This led to securing funding between ECT and the DWP to continue to mend the gaps with understanding disabled people's experiences and mental health. This has involved a significant cultural shift with the DWP.

Generally, people expressed how they felt their mental health had improved through coming together as disabled people, sharing common problems and finding solutions with students and professionals. Securing funding to target specific gaps marked a significant shift with organisations in the community. However, some participants just wanted to meet to ensure that people continued to leave the house. Finding funding to support people to travel with the support they need to meet up in a community venue over a cuppa and biscuit, is an ongoing gap as ECT have struggled to find such funding.

Students and social workers committed to supporting campaigns and demonstrations led by disabled people. As one social worker observed:

"*We are told to make cuts all the time, all the focus is on saving money. By getting out there with disabled people campaigning for their rights we are showing that we are all in this together. Nothing will change until we are all fighting to mend the same gaps*".

The main themes that participants identified as central to supporting and working in partnership with disabled people were

- Rights: gaps could be mended by social workers having good knowledge of disability rights and human rights in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD 2006).
- Values: gaps could be mended by social workers having good knowledge of the social models of disability and applying this in all contexts.
- Information: gaps could be mended by social workers sharing all relevant information with disabled people .
- Communication: gaps could be mended by social workers clarifying social model terminology and rejecting medical model language.

The celebration event was supported by the Service Director for Adult Social Care who also made the journey to London, along with participants from all Mend the Gap projects to 'Demonstrate the impact of being partners in knowledge'. As a significant outcome for all, this is discussed at the end of this section (summary).

4.3.11 Overall Key findings and conclusions

The individual project summaries above convey the unique learning and outcomes specific to each group. Common features from each project and shared outcomes are evaluated to demonstrate overall impact of the Mend the Gap approach which will inform final analysis and triangulation of data. Gaps identified by each project are unique to people's individual experiences, yet common to people in similar situations. By coming together to recognise this people stated feeling less isolated in their experiences.

Common gaps identified in all projects involved focus on, rights, values, information and communication. In this sense, I conclude that this usefully establishes a core framework for

each project where all these factors are addressed with specific gaps and experiences explored. In line with research aims, I sought to ascertain how the findings could influence educators' approaches to designing the social work curriculum and student learning process. Also, how the findings could transfer across a range of higher education settings. I had intended initially to present each of the transformative evaluations from each Mend the Gap project and compare these with focus group findings. However, in discussion with my supervisors, I could see the benefits of combining the richness and volume of data that would add a deeper dimension to the T-PE process, thus bringing an overall coherence to triangulation of the research findings. I considered most carefully the implications of this as I did not want to undermine in any way, the shared ownership of the evaluation strategies designed and implemented by each Mend the Gap group by adding my own analysis as researcher. However, I found that, by bringing all data generated together, I was able to identify themes underpinned by experiential and social constructivist theories, which strengthened the rigour of knowledge translation that enhances the contribution to the current field of knowledge, this thesis makes.

Braun and Clarke's six - step reflexive thematic analysis framework (2006, 2019) was applied to all transformative project evaluations. Getting to grips with each of the projects transformative participatory evaluations and applying reflexive thematic analysis to the overall findings was an additional exciting stage. Every single comment someone had made was valuable to this process. Combining all feedback to dig deeper into the significance of the Mend the Gap approach for me was a new and defining aspect of my role as researcher. On reflection, if I had made the decision at the outset to apply reflexive TA to all data analysis, I would have introduced this in the research process and ideally identified a co-researcher to engage in the overall analysis by looking for codes and themes alongside me. This would have been time consuming and is something for future consideration with participatory research projects which I shall pick up on in the next chapter. The six steps are now presented to reveal an overall trustworthy and insightful picture of the research findings.

Three main themes are presented with an accompanying narrative which gets to the core of learning across the projects.

4.3.12. Applying Reflexive TA; Mend the Gap research findings

Step 1: Becoming familiar with the data

Braun and Clarke explain that considerable investment of time is required with the first phase which 'provides the bedrock for the rest of the analysis' (2006, p.87). I was immersed in the data as it was being gathered and documented my own reflective thoughts as they developed through this immersion at all stages of the data collection. Gathering data from each project involved combining three lengthy T-PE evaluations together, which I read repeatedly searching for meaning and patterns before moving onto coding.

Step 2: Generating initial codes

Having familiarised myself with the data I had ideas about what was emerging as interesting and applied myself to systematically coding the data set as guided by Braun and Clarke (2006). By giving full and equal attention to each data item, I identified interesting features that formed the basis of themes. I was careful to include features that departed from the main themes emerging as these could be useful at a later stage. An example of coding from a short segment of data is provided to illustrate how this was conducted.

Figure 1.

Evaluation extract	Codes
We learned a lot about different cultures.	Increased knowledge
This project has helped us to understand the importance of respecting each other's beliefs.	Cultural diversity Promoted respect
I know I am not the only one to say, I am no longer scared of social workers. Before coming on this course, I really feared social workers and other professionals. Now I understand the differences in people's roles and especially learning about social work values, how social workers are not there to judge me. They are there to help.	Fear of professionals Professional values Non-judgemental Understanding social work role

In this way, I colour coded all data to enable identification of codes, matching more data to codes and identifying new codes each time I re-visited the data. Thoroughness at this stage was essential to recognising patterns emerging.

Step 3: Search for themes

In this phase all codes were put into a long list and examined to identify themes within a 'central organising concept'. This resulted in a collection of themes and sub themes and a separate 'miscellaneous' page which as noted earlier, Braun and Clarke (2006) advise creating. I was interested to note that some statements I had initially considered to be less relevant to identifiable codes were woven into codes on the second or third iterative stage of the process. Braun and Clarke refer to 'the slow wheel of interpretation' to invest time over efficacy for an 'analysis tech' or 'quicker result' (Braun and Clarke 2019, p.12). Perhaps the image of a slow wheel led me to present the identification of themes and sub themes as colourful wheel charts. The five charts, presented below, clearly illustrate the presence of both within the data.

**Theme 1
Promoting Equality**

(Participants 63)

- Equality is achieved through sharing experiences
- Equal learning platforms need to be co-created
- Too much learning takes place in classrooms from books
- The best way to learn about cultural diversity is from each other
- We can only truly learn form each other when we engage in dialogue
- Finding out about other/different beliefs helps to change own beliefs
- Professionals need to do more to challenge inequality
- Social workers need to actively campaign on behalf of those who are discriminated against
- People should have the same money and support
- Everyone should have equal access in the community
- It is essential that people learn English as soon as they arrive in the UK
- Social workers need to connect with service user led organsiations in the community
- Important to listen to what people say and belive them
- Human experience is far better than 'case studies'

Theme 2
Promoting Rights

(Participants 63)

- ■ SWs need to have a good understanding of human rights
- ■ SWs need to have a good understanding of the UN Convention of Childrens' rights
- ■ People do not always know what their rights are
- ■ Social workers need to fight for peoples' rights
- ■ Rights are protected by the law
- ■ Advocacy is most important to support and promote peoples' rights
- ■ Often people feel they have no rights, no choice and no voice
- ■ Everyone has the right to a peaceful life without discrimination
- ■ People have the right to live in suitable accommodation
- ■ Having no rights to work increases mental health problems
- ■ People have the right to challenge
- ■ Often people complain and nothing happens
- ■ Social workers don't always do what they say they will do

Theme 3
Building Relationships

(Participants 63)

- Important to get to know each other as people first
- Learning from each other is important
- Good to show SWs what young people are good at
- Many people in need of support do not trust SWs
- Getting to know social workers changes views of them
- Getting to know SWs increases confidence with asking for help
- Social workers need to ensure people have full information
- People have more in common than they realise
- Professionals also have lived experiences of receiving services, disadvantage and discrimination
- People do not feel comfortable talking with SWs who they don't know
- Confusion around different proffessional roles
- Building trust is essential to work in partnership

Theme 4
Balancing Power

Legend:
- Social workers have too much power
- People in need of services and support have no power
- Professionals need to use their power to help people find their own power
- People need full information about UK law to protect themselves and their children
- Fear of social workers
- People's voices together are stronger
- Social workers are under pressure to make budget cuts
- important to understand each others' roles
- Social workers and students feel powerless
- Sharing experinces leads to sharing power
- Co-producing knowledge and learning together challenges power relations
- Academics have too much power over what is taught
- Nothing about us without us
- Policy makers and senior managers have the power to make positve changes

Theme 5
Improving outcomes

- Important to change systems and structures together
- Difficult to make changes and influence policy and practice at an individual level
- Social workers, managers and policy makers need to listen to peoples' experiences
- What is written down and what really happens are very different
- Learning from people's experiences promotes new knowledge and insight
- Agencies and service user organisations working together improves outcomes.
- Important to co-produce the resources that people need
- Important that learning together leads to change
- Involving people with lived experince in education needs to be outcome focussed
- No point being involved if does not lead to change
- Sharing common problems helps to find solutions
- Social workers need to fight for improvements
- More co-learning from experiential knowledge is needed in social work education
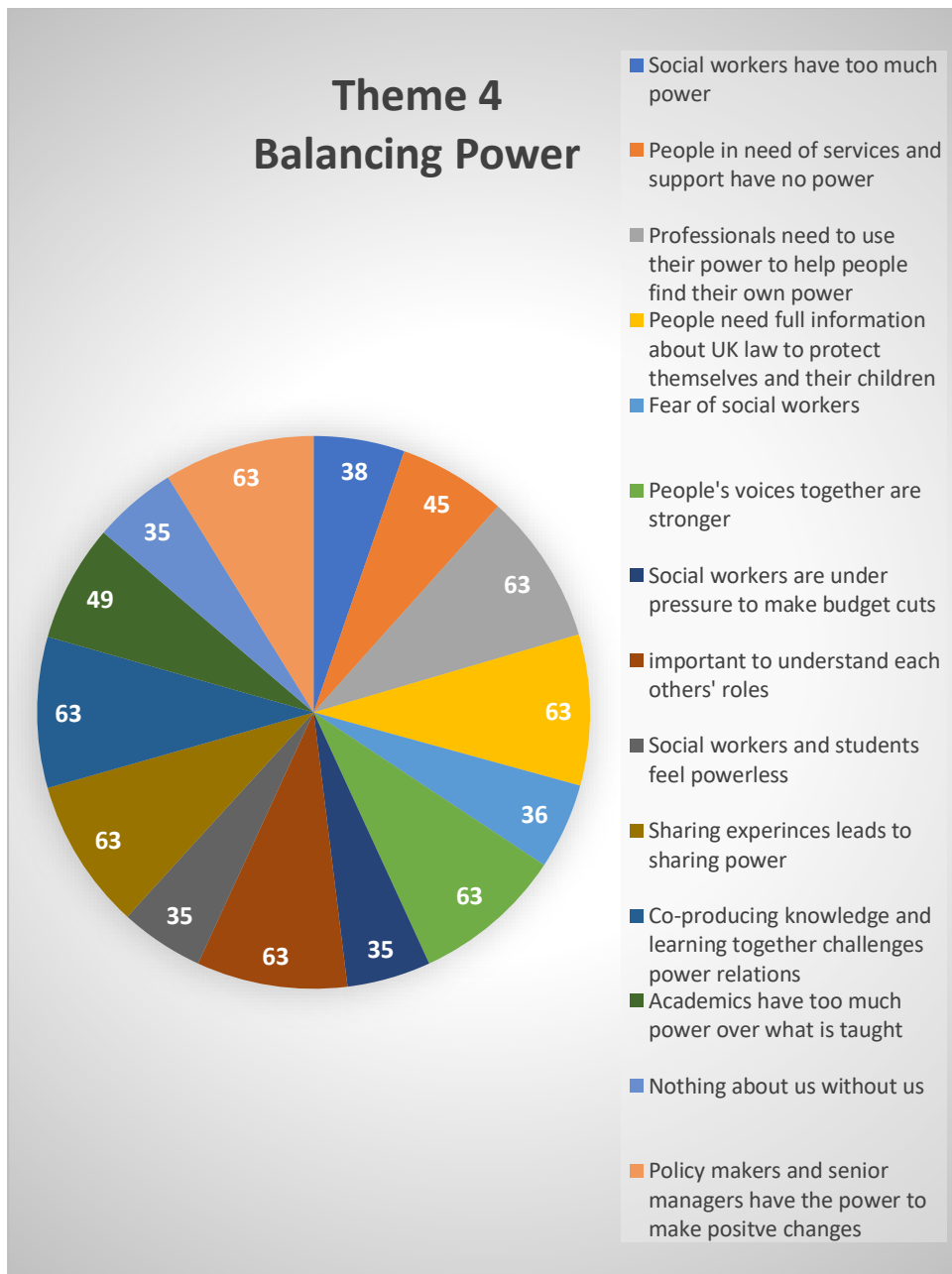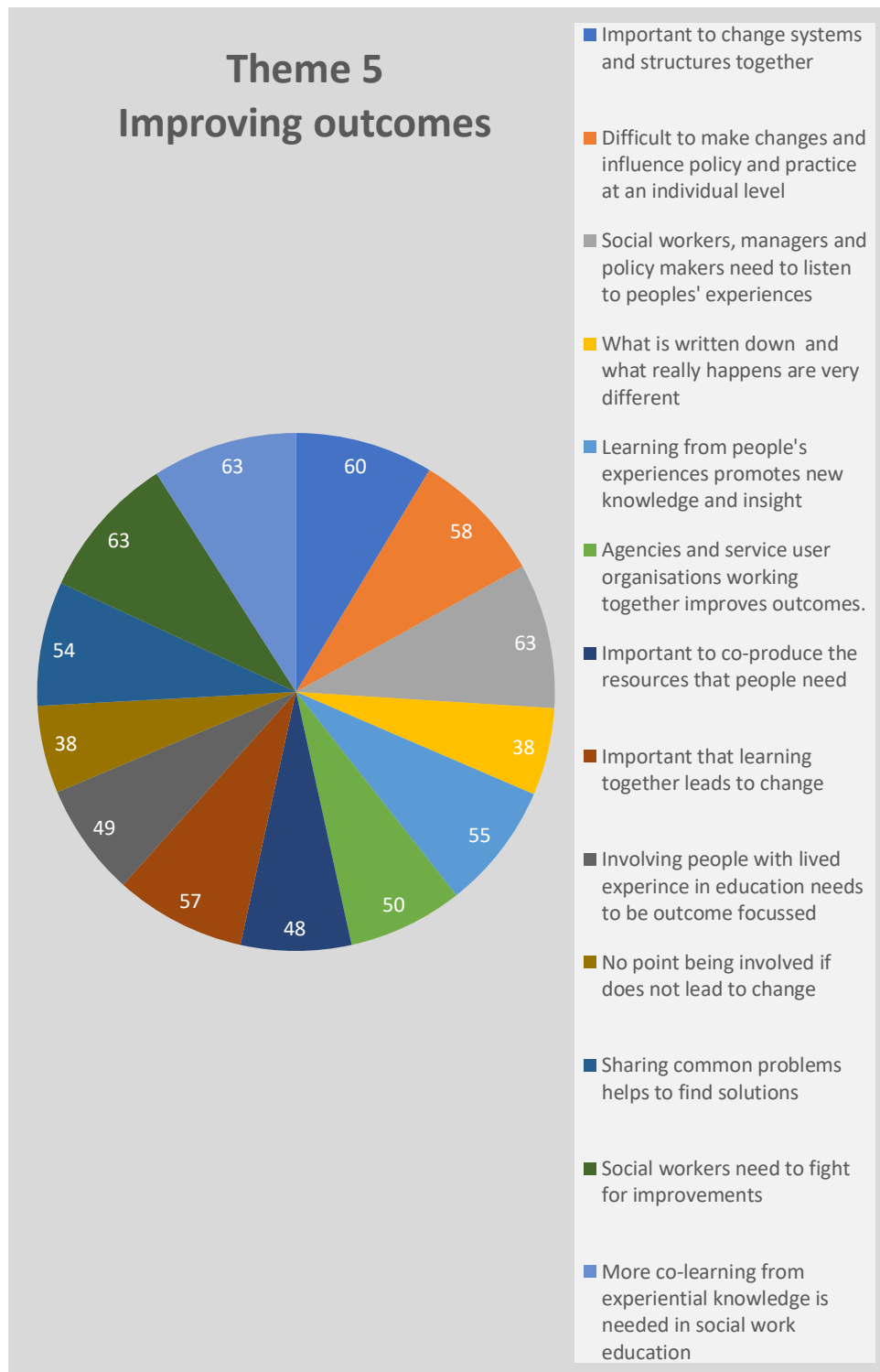
Step 4: Review themes:

In this phase I reviewed, modified and developed the preliminary themes that developed in stage 3. I read (and re read) the data linked with the themes then reviewed data under each theme to see whether the data extract supported them both within a single Mend the Gap project and across all projects. This involved some re -coding and moving some codes to themes where I noticed there was a stronger association. This included themes from the 'miscellaneous' list as I could see the patterns amongst the data set becoming clearer revealing greater depth of data. It is important to emphasise what an iterative this process was, as I went backwards and forwards between the data sets to find more meaning and potential new themes through ongoing coding. Recognising that I needed to stop, I took note of Braun and Clarkes' advice not to 'get over- enthusiastic with endless re-coding' which could become similar to 'rearranging the hundreds and thousands on a nicely decorated cake' (2006, p.92). At the end of this phase I had a good idea of the different themes and how they fit together to tell the story of the data.

Step 5: Define themes:

In this phase I looked again for consistency of themes further 'defining and refining' which Braun and Clarke explain means identifying the 'essence' of what each theme is about as well as the themes overall. I ensured the themes worked by returning to the data extracts for each theme and writing a detailed analysis of each that fit with a coherent analysis of the overall story the data told in relation to the main research question. With finally naming themes I was careful to choose succinct phrases which clearly reflected the meaning.

Step 6: Producing the report.

The last stage was to write up the report at which point Braun and Clarke raise the level of expectation with their guidance that it should be a 'compelling' account. It is the selection of themes which are the key ingredients of the metaphorical cake Braun and Clarke use to define 'organic TA'.

 "*Imagine the wannabe cake baker: standing in their kitchen, surveying the array of ingredients (as well as skills and other factors) at hand, their decision of what sort of cake to*

bake reflects the intersection of many factors. The same goes for analysis in organic TA."(Braun and Clarke, ibid.p4).

I have used Reflexive TA as a recipe for making a strong argument in relation to the main research question that will inform the future direction of involving people with lived experiences in social work education.

Mend the Gap Research Findings.

Applying reflexive thematic analysis to the Mend the Gap research data as described above, revealed three core themes in relation to the main research question:

'*What difference does service user and carer involvement make in social work education?*'

1. **Overcoming fear and finding power**
2. **A rights-based approach to working in partnership**
3. **Sharing experiential knowledge improves outcomes**

1. **Overcoming fear and finding power**

A consistent theme was expressed by people describing their fears of the power others held over them.

"*All I know about social workers is that they can take your children away*" (parent).

"*Social workers don't believe what young people say, they decide themselves what age they think you are*" (YP).

"*I am terrified of assessments, thinking what they are going to cut next. There is not that much left to cut but that's what social workers do every time*" (disabled participant).

In talking about the fears participants had, it was clear that some people would avoid seeing social workers rather than be open to the possibility that seeing them could lead to positive interventions and help. One example was shared of a Syrian mother who was contacted by a social worker arranging a home visit. The woman became terrified that the social worker was arranging to come and remove her son and decided to make plans to return to Syria. She felt she would rather risk returning home over losing her son. She contacted the refugee support service to help with her plans who were able to reassure her that it was

usual practice for social workers to make contact with Syrian families on arrival in the UK. It was a standard introduction to ensure people have the support they require.

Migrant parents having such mis-conceptions about the social work role was common and highlighted an information and communication gap. We found that gaps could be mended by social workers having an active role in the local community, building relations with refugee/asylum seeker support organisations where they would be welcomed to meet with parents and explain their role.

Similar fears were expressed by unaccompanied young people who had no understanding of the different roles professionals had who intervened in their lives. Social workers, foster carers and health professionals were seen in the same light as border agency guards. All were seen as agents of the state, who had the power to determine if they would be accepted as a young person and allowed to remain in the UK. Getting to know social workers and hearing from their perspectives how they wanted to improve support to young people, asking them how best they could do this, was new to them. It gave young people the confidence to mend gaps by co-producing the ten- step guide for social workers which is also useful to foster carers. Realising that social workers did not have all the answers and that they themselves had the knowledge to present solutions from their experiences was a real shift in power.

This message was equally strongly conveyed by the DWP worker who openly stated wanting to engage in dialogue with disabled people in the community but not knowing how to. In my view, this cuts through the debate on the meaning of empowerment picked up in chapter two. To me it was not a case of social workers or other professionals empowering people by suggesting some actions, it was more a case of people together working out who had the knowledge that was needed and valuing the wider impact of that knowledge being shared. Research has established the importance of social workers being culturally competent to promote positive outcomes for service users (National Association of Social Workers, 2003, Harrison and Turner, 2011, Walker, 2019). Similarly, research has established the importance of social workers having a good understanding of the social model of disability to improve outcomes with disabled people (Levitt, 2017, Scope, 2020, Cameron et al in McLaughlin et al, 2021). These concepts are commonly taught in the education curriculum via lectures, seminars and books. The difference the Mend the Gap

approach makes is by creating an equal learning platform where people together share knowledge and power. The old adage 'knowledge is power' attributed to Sir Francis Bacon (1597 in Garcia, 2001) established the concept that all achievements came from sharing knowledge and therefore power. According to Foucault (1997), who coined the term 'power-knowledge', power is based on knowledge. I shall return to the impact of sharing knowledge and power in theme three. Within this theme, I wish to highlight an essential principle of Mend the Gap which all participants have commented. That, it is the first time that participants with lived experiences have taken part in something they led on, rather than joining something others have pre- defined. This changes their positioning from the outset by locating power with those who experience being most stigmatised and discriminated against. By introducing students and professionals at the second rather than first meeting point, people can share their fears in the first meeting and be heard. This prepares a different starting point for meeting social workers. When all participants share some of their own experiences this creates an environment where both groups can come together on equal terms. To refer to Allport's classical study (1954) where the concept of 'in-groups' and 'outgroups' were first formulated, the divide between professionals and people at the receiving end of services creates a sense of 'othering'. When people come together and share their fears as well as experiences of social problems, empathy is communicated and people feel they are not being bracketed into different groups. When social workers who are traditionally in the role of helper reveal their own vulnerabilities, such as experiencing homelessness or discrimination, this has a humanising effect of seeing them as someone who has also needed help. The impact of this upon participants who are traditionally viewed as needing help which can often be associated with being a weakness or carrying a stigma, changes in this human connection.

My research demonstrates how an equal learning environment is co-created. Intersectionality and participatory methods build upon critical theories by placing focus on activism and partnerships when engaging with diverse communities. Implementing an intersectional approach still seems to be considered relatively new in the UK yet it is naturally aligned to examining power dynamics and oppression that minority groups experience in receiving services which maintain inequalities. Whilst we still seem to be getting to grips with the meaning of intersectionality and co-production in the UK, 'as a

relocation of power and control enabling people with lived experiences to define their own problems based on their own experiences and knowledge' (Needham and Carr 2009), it has been suggested that co-production is an approach to transformative intersectionality as summarised by Bowleg and Bauer (2016):

"*No attention to power, no intersectionality*" (p.1)

Through exploring our identities and finding common ground for the first time, for example between the experiences of a black female social worker and white disabled male service user, fears and feelings of being powerless are viewed in a different light. Mending gaps involves breaking through barriers that maintain people in unequal roles. This is a key point for my own reflection as a practitioner and researcher having maintained silence throughout my social work career about my own experiences of using mental health services. The power the doctors and psychiatrists held over me as a young adult, has had a lasting grip. My reflexive learning is a discussion point for the next chapter (five).

To summarise this theme and introduce the next, I shall refer to a quote from the chapter that was co-written as an outcome of mending gaps with parents introduced earlier in this section (Abdullah et al, in McLaughlin et al, 2021):

"*The poor image parents had of social workers at the beginning of the programme changed in a matter of weeks. Parents stated they no longer fear social workers now that they understand the role of a social worker is to keep families together, be a support to them and fight for their rights*". (p.99)

1. **A rights-based approach to working in partnership**

The importance of knowing one's rights embodies the key values of a civilised society, yet a consistent theme in each project was lack of knowledge relating to people's rights.

"*The first time I heard about the UN convention of children's rights was through this project. I thought I had no rights.*"(YP)

"*Since finding out how service users have led the way to achieving more rights, I think that social workers should join people in their campaigns, it is our role to get out there and fight for people's rights to a better life not to explain why they can't have this* "(Student).

"The best part of this project has been finding out how social workers can help us to find out about our rights. As an asylum seeker you believe you have none". (Parent)

Core information specific to social work values and professional standards was shared in each project in respect of human rights, social justice and professional integrity as set out by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW, 2012, 2021). Also, in relation to the Professional Capabilities Framework (BASW, 2019). Concepts associated with Mend the Gap are common concepts for example, in respect of co-production, exploring prejudice, building trust, balancing power and building communities. It is therefore well researched that factors of equality, shared goals, institutional support and co-operation are essential to promoting partnership working (Thompson,2000, Robson et al, 2008, Beresford and Carr,2012,). What is strongly conveyed throughout the research data is the how the warmth, trust and relationships built between people have been key to personal change and co-producing outcomes. These are qualities that research identifies as highly valued qualities people with lived experiences seek in a social worker (Beresford 2012). However, the focus in such research is on people's experiences and views of the social worker. The contrast and contribution of knowledge from my research, is that both parties are open to learning from each other, therefore the joint discovery of these qualities reveals new insights and learning for all.

Freire talks about how the oppressed 'internalise oppression' and become 'at one and the same time themselves the oppressor' (1970, p.48). This was evident throughout the projects when people talked about how they had compounded the oppression some people experience by holding discriminatory beliefs. As a result of listening to people's experiences of oppression, identifying with their own and learning about human rights, some participants changed some of their own fundamental beliefs. This model of humanity as Freire defines it means that individually, people have a 'fear of freedom'. The aim of the learning process is to liberate people from their external and internal oppression, to facilitate learners to become capable of changing their lives and the society they live in (Freire, 1970); for example, outcomes that include people stating they have changed their oppressive views on LGBTQ. Policy makers reverting oppressive decisions on accommodation provision, present evidence of how this organic process Freire describes, can develop when people learn together through engaging in dialogue.

Further, the projects have demonstrated the social constructive perspective that knowledge comes out of human relationships. Socially constructed ideas that are central to social reality have been examined throughout the participatory methodology. For example, to mend the Gap with disabled people, the origins of the disabled people's movement were explored from the experiences of those who have been in an institution. This demonstrates the social, cultural and political consequences that knowledge creates in the community, about disabled people. Through engaging in dialogue about disabling practices, attitudes, physical and cultural barriers, a deeper understanding was gained about how peoples' rights for example, to live in their own home, have been placed under significant threat due to funding cuts. Participants were motivated to take action to promote social justice. Notably, students and social workers talked about joining active campaigns with disabled people for the first time. This is not something they had been motivated to do as a result of attending lectures on disability issues. As one social worker observed:

"*Learning about the social model and medical model of disability in uni does not have the same impact as it does when you hear from people the difference these different approaches make to their lives.* "

Through exploring the significance of language which is of central importance to social constructionism that sees language as 'not neutral' (Gergen and Davis, 1985), participants discussed how the truths and values once held by the medical model have been changed to a new socially constructed knowledge of the social model. What is most significant about these truths, values and realities is that they have been examined by people's experiences and what they know. As explored in the literature review, the origins of the social model and equality legislation in place today are people's experiences and first-hand knowledge, challenging the accepted social construction of 'disability'. Paradoxically, this presents the source of social constructivist criticisms; no objective truth exists, and no construct is more legitimate than another (Stam, 2001) and emphasises the environmental factors on human behaviours and that the significance of relationships among people creates reality. The outcomes of the Mend the Gap projects from a social constructivist perspective have enabled change, as individuals interacting with the group environment have co-constructed new understandings of the world. Where people were once unaware or accepted that they have no rights – for example asylum seekers absorbing the slogan 'no recourse to public funds' results in absorbing the

message that 'asylum seekers have no rights' - they have become aware of their rights and other people's responsibilities in respect of supporting these. In my view, this evidences the most significant outcomes of empirical research.

What I am particularly interested to highlight is what I see as the distinct features of a Mend the Gap approach and why it is effective with promoting change and community building. I believe this is a most useful model to enhance the educational curriculum. To me, a key reason is that it is fundamentally a rights- based approach. By starting from the perspective of those who feel most oppressed and bringing them from the margins together with those who are in a stronger position to support them, a shared journey of discovery is made. This is a completely different way of learning than that which takes place in classroom contexts. The literature review and my focus group research findings demonstrate how traditionally, this is how people have been involved in social work education. Not least, as my research demonstrates, because those who feel most oppressed are least likely to enter a university and talk about themselves in front of people they do not know or trust. The focus that participants placed upon the importance of all people knowing their rights, came from sharing a journey where assumptions were challenged and mutual learning led to new ideas for promoting and securing people's rights. For example, this included outcomes such as engaging the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) in dialogue with young people an]d developing a new 'Orientation group' to inform newly arrived young people about their rights. Other outcomes overlap with the next and final theme of this analysis which has been the most important demonstration of promoting people's rights. To conclude this theme, a key and consistent message identified by participants with lived experiences was one of feeling they had no rights. This increased my reflexive awareness of my own experience of being told that I could admit myself to hospital 'voluntarily' and if I didn't, I would be sectioned which, would have meant being denied rights. By not having the right to refuse this did not really feel like I had a choice or any real say in the matter. Mending gaps involves understanding what it feels like to have no rights, which is more than learning about what those rights are. (I shall discuss reflexive awareness in relation to my own experiences further in the next chapter, five).

2. Sharing experiential knowledge improves outcomes

The most important message from my research is that the Mend the Gap approach demonstrates how transformative outcomes come through learning from people's experiences.

"By coming together and sharing our experiences we have learned so much more about cultural differences and each other's roles. We don't get this type of learning from lectures and academic books; this is life changing." (SW student).

"The big difference for me with coming on this course was knowing that we would all be sharing responsibilities to co-produce knowledge and find new solutions to the same old problems. Disabled people have been consulted to death. We have finally broken new ground with the DWP and qualified social workers who have listened to and learned from us". (Disabled participant).

"The biggest gaps to be mended are with policy makers. It was fantastic to know that the Home Office wanted to hear about our experiences to improve accommodation and support to asylum seekers. This will make a big difference to families". (Parent).

The starting point with a Mend the Gap programme includes introducing the overall aim to co-produce outcomes that make a difference. Such outcomes are not pre- determined, they come from the organic collaborative learning process. This is probably one of the features that initially seems most vague to research participants who are keen to know what the intended outcomes of the research are. As disabled participants emphasised, they have been involved in many consultations that did not lead to any changes. Or at least that they were made aware of. As explained in chapter three, the co-impact of the projects is critical to ensuring shared ownership of sustainable outcomes.

Examples of this include the establishment of a support network for unaccompanied asylum seeker young people and a drop in for asylum seeker parents open to social work/ student involvement to enhance community roles and links. It also establishing collaborative partnerships between a service user led organisation, community safety and the DWP. Further, six of the parents and a social work student co-authored a book chapter which was something they had assumed was the preserve of academics. One of the biggest and most surprising outcomes was mending gaps with the Home Office that led to substantive

accommodation changes. Arguably, this was partly due to timing and luck that they were undertaking reviews of policy and guidance at the time of our project, however it was the links made and active engagement that initiated this.

Through undertaking this research, legacies have been created with participants and other people in the community sharing common concerns. Having such tangible measurable outcomes from my research is the strength of the original contribution it makes, particularly in a research context where there is scant evidence of the impact of involvement as identified in the literature review (chapter two). Participants strongly conveyed levels of surprise at the changes it was possible to make through equal leaning. As some writers have observed what counts as equal status is hard to define, what is essential is that participants perceive equal status in the situation (Robinson and Preston, 1976, Riordan and Ruggiero, 1980, Cohen, 1982, Pettigrew and Tropp, 2011). I reflect upon this further as a discussion point in the following chapter (five)).

Analysis of this theme revealed equally important learning that led to individual changes of views. For example, some participants talked about changes of viewpoints in relation to LGBTQ, something they held strong views about all their lives. They came to view this in a completely different light when they built a relationship with a participant who had to flee their country where there is still a death penalty for the 'crime' of seeking to live an authentic and peaceful life. Reflecting upon shared goals enabled prejudices to be challenged together. This is a further key feature of the Mend the Gap approach. As referred to earlier, Allport's influential work on the' nature of prejudice' (1959) explores the dynamics of prejudice that involves 'self-categorisation' whereby people place themselves according to influences such as family, community, nationality, religion, politics that Allport named as 'in groups'. 'Outgroups' as the minority members of society who were opposite to the majority members of 'in-groups'. (Allport, 1979). The first step for Mend the Gap participants was in coming together with perceptions of each other that some participants reflected upon were based upon stereotypes and prejudices. Making this connection with Allport's seminal work that has significantly influenced studies to challenge prejudice six decades on, may seem out of place in a professional context with an underpinning value base that challenges prejudice on every level. However, the personal learning that was shared through weekly reflections demonstrated how attitudes were changed through building relationships and trust. Central

to this was sharing experiential knowledge across the traditional divide that exists when people with lived experiences more often tell their stories to those in professional helping roles who listen. As mentioned earlier, when a social worker described her experience of racism alongside a white disabled participant's experience of disability hate crime, they shared an empathy as well as increased understanding of each other. They and other participants reflected on how the perceived distance between them – as a black professional woman and white disabled man in receipt of services – was reduced.

It is important to highlight that recruiting participants for a Mend the Gap project is voluntary in nature. Participants need to be willing to co-create the conditions for changing attitudes. These conditions cannot be imposed upon people, they come from people's willingness to engage in a mutual exchange and develop a common knowledge through sharing experiences and building trust. This in my view is one of the most important outcomes, people being fluid within the categories of their different roles. When one student participant shared his experience of growing up in care, the connection this made with young people's experiences was reflected upon by all in the group. The student said it was the first time he had spoken about his experience in a way that he felt able to talk about the difficulties and how that had impacted upon him. Previously he explained, he had felt the need to use different language and talk positively about how he had 'overcome his childhood trauma'. He realised he could be a young person who had experienced hard times growing up being let down by a system that was meant to support him and still be a professional:

"*I have not spoken so openly about my experiences before now but hearing from young people really made me want to let them know that I have had some really difficult times. I think it is good to be able to share this so young people don't think you never know what it's like to be a young person, not listened to with no parent there for you. That's why I decided to be a social worker*. "

This student's open position and the way in which participants were able to reflect upon their experiences in relation to each other, was a significant point of reflexivity for me. Maintaining a reflective log throughout was essential to recognising my own values, interests and growing insights in the research topic (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, Sandelowski, 1995). It led to me to re-consider my own position of non-disclosure as a mental health service user and to conclude that one of the most important ways in which sharing

experiential knowledge improves outcomes is to erase the lines that divide us. A point to return to in the following discussion chapter (five).

4.3.13 Summary.

To summarise the reflexive thematic analysis, it is important to emphasise the new contributions my research makes.

The aim of gap-mending has been defined by the co-founders of PowerUs as a reflective tool in discussions about what mends and what creates gaps between different groups in society (Askheim, Beresford and Heule 2016). My initial interest as described in chapter one, was in the way this approach seeks to decrease the distance between service users and professional social workers. My research findings build upon the concept as a reflective tool by adding a framework within which the tool is integral that explains how to design and implement a Mend the Gap project. It also establishes a new evidence base for evaluating the impact of involvement in social work education which it is hoped will provide the impetus needed for others to take this forward. Students and practitioners have their own lived experiences of using services, of experiencing discrimination or disadvantage. The Mend the Gap approach makes space for sharing these experiences within an equal learning environment. This was demonstrated throughout the three projects. Whilst this is a feature of many types of participatory projects where the equal sharing, responsibility and learning is key to the approach, this is a new and innovative approach within the social work education context in the UK. It is one which I believe is equally transferable to other professional and higher education contexts. The key defining feature, as a model for education and practice, is the way that power is addressed from the outset by meeting first and foremost with people with lived experiences. Those who feel most marginalised, stigmatised and discriminated against, identify the gaps from their perspectives and set the agenda. The literature review and my focus group findings that I shall come to next, demonstrate that the aim of involving service users and carers at all levels of social work education' (DofH, 2002) has largely not been achieved. By involving people with lived experiences throughout all stages of Mend the Gap projects, the structure and environments created redressed power imbalances. People from marginalised communities move away from the margins and take their space to utilise their knowledge and experience to improve education and services.

One final overall outcome for all projects, introduced earlier, was organising a Mend the Gap conference to 'Demonstrate the impact of being partners in knowledge' (May 2019). Funding from NESWA enabled twenty-two participants from all projects to attend. Each project film made was premiered and each project group gave a brief presentation about the findings and impact of participatory working. Keynote speakers included the Executive Director of Strategy Policy and Engagement from the newly formed, at that point, yet to launch, registration body, Social Work England (SWE). They spoke of the commitment to restructuring social work; to ensure that co-production would be central to the social work education curriculum. I shall pick up on how far this commitment has progressed in the next discussion chapter (five).

PowerUs colleagues from Lund University where 'Gap Mending' originated, travelled to support this event along with Peter Beresford, chair of PowerUs, who I have introduced earlier as someone whose extensive work and publications has had a huge impact on my own learning. This is because of the way in which he has shared his own experiences as a mental health service user within his writing and research and high-profile academic career. Having observed the ways in which Mend the Gap participants took risks, to participate in something not only that was completely new but that many participants were fearful of, I can appreciate even more that Peter took risks by being as open about his experiences as early as the 1980's. In my view, he illuminated the way forward by showing how sharing experiential knowledge is essential to overcoming barriers and the lines that divide and 'other 'people. This would explain why I have chosen Peter's feedback from the conference to capture the impact of participants as partners in knowledge:

" *To witness that equality can be achieved with asylum seekers young and old standing alongside disabled people, academics and students is a significant achievement for all*".(Beresford, 2019).

Impact is one of the most important features of this research. It is returned to in the following 'Discussion' chapter. To continue with this chapter the next section will explore focus group methods.

4.4.2 Section Two: Method Two

4.4.1 Implementation of Focus Groups.

By design, constructivist focus groups allow participants and researchers to co-create knowledge together within the specific focus group context rather than uncover the one singular truth about a research quest. Group profiles of the five focus groups were provided in the previous chapter (three) along with an overview of focus methodology.

The wide-ranging nature of people's experiences means that people from different backgrounds become involved in social work training. As no personal questions were asked, there was no specific information gathered other than participants' ethnicity and gender. Notably, most participants with lived experiences identified with having a learning disability, physical disability or mental health problem. Having an intersectional perspective added a further dimension to the value of experiential learning. By promoting a culturally responsive approach, cultural referents and perspectives are used to acknowledge and connect participants' multiple cultures and social identities within the inquiry process, providing relevant lenses through which participants interact with researchers in the co-creation of knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1995, Gay and Kirkland, 2003, Lahman et al, 2011 in Rodriguez et al, 2011)).

For example, a black woman carer described her experiences of being asked to talk about her caring role as if this was something separate from her identity as a woman who experiences discrimination because of her gender and colour:

''*Experiencing discrimination as a carer is an extension of experiencing discrimination as a black disabled woman, being in a caring role is not separate to who I am it is part of my identity''*, (Carer participant).

The rationale for conducting focus groups, research design and all relevant considerations have been explained in chapter three. So too has the importance of reflexivity, which is relevant to revisit at each stage of the research process. Gobo reminds us of the importance of reflexivity in the research relationship:

"The self-aware analysis of the dynamics between researcher and participants, the critical capacity to make explicit the position assumed by the observer in the field, and the way in

which the researcher's positioning impacts on the research process" (Gobo in Silverman, 2011, p.22).

As outlined in the previous section of this chapter, consideration of my own identity, beliefs, prejudices and world view was integral to understanding the impact I could have upon focus group participants. The ultimate rigour and reflexivity of the study is presented with the data analysis, which is the focus of this section.

4.4.2. Applying Reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA)

The approach to thematic analysis has already been explained. In the same way that themes and patterns were identified from the mend the Gap T-PE data, the six-step framework was applied to focus group data. The reflexive thematic analysis applied to this data is consistent with experiential and social constructivist theories and values, and reports participants' experiences and examines the ways in which meanings and experiences are effects of collective discourse. The focus group questions were designed to gain insight into service users' and carers' accounts of their experiences and perspectives. Sub-questions identified in the previous chapter (three), were developed from the main research question, to enable deeper exploration of the impact of participants' experiences of involvement. To minimise repetition of the six-step approach, a summary of the process follows.

Step 1:

I produced written verbatim transcripts from the focus group recordings which required listening to several times, re- reading and updating until the accounts were accurate. (Sample transcripts are provided in appendix seven). With each re-draft, early impressions of the findings were noted. (A snapshot of notes from transcripts is presented in appendix three).

Step 2:

As I had worked through several iterations of transcripts, I continued to identify codes as illustrated in section one, using highlighter pen to indicate potential patterns segments of data. I used broad inclusive codes to ensure that all data responding to the research question was included. This proved to be almost as time consuming as producing written transcripts, but I wanted to ensure coding for as many themes and patterns as possible.

Step 3:

The presence of themes and sub themes is presented below, as before, as five charts to clearly illustrate the presence of themes and sub themes within the data.
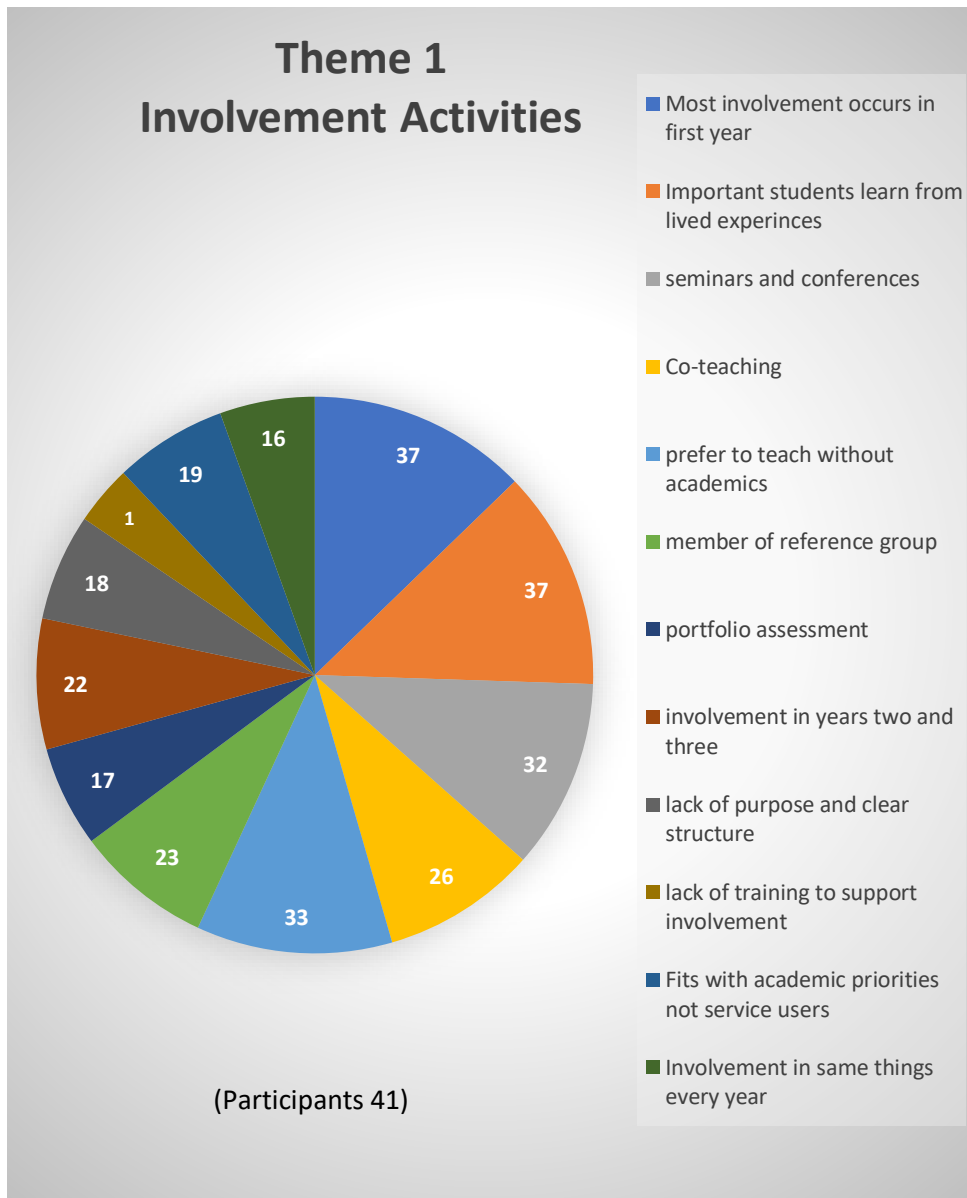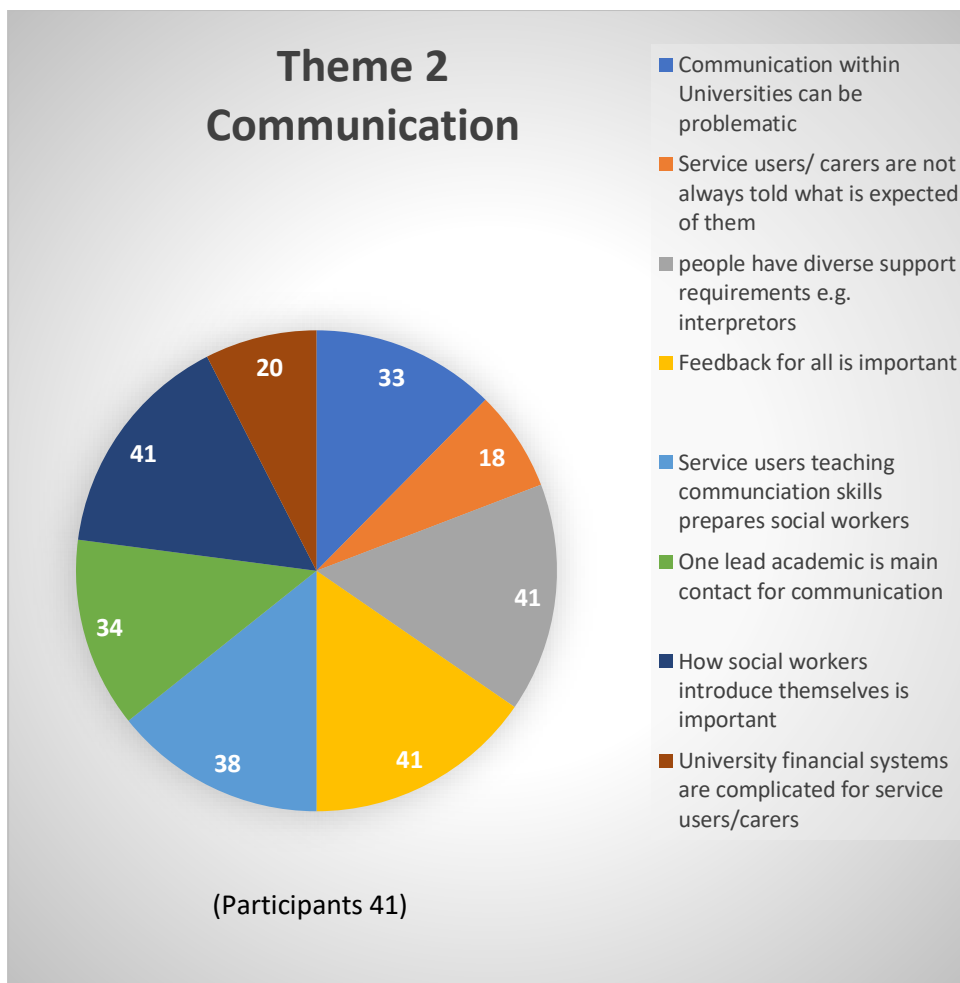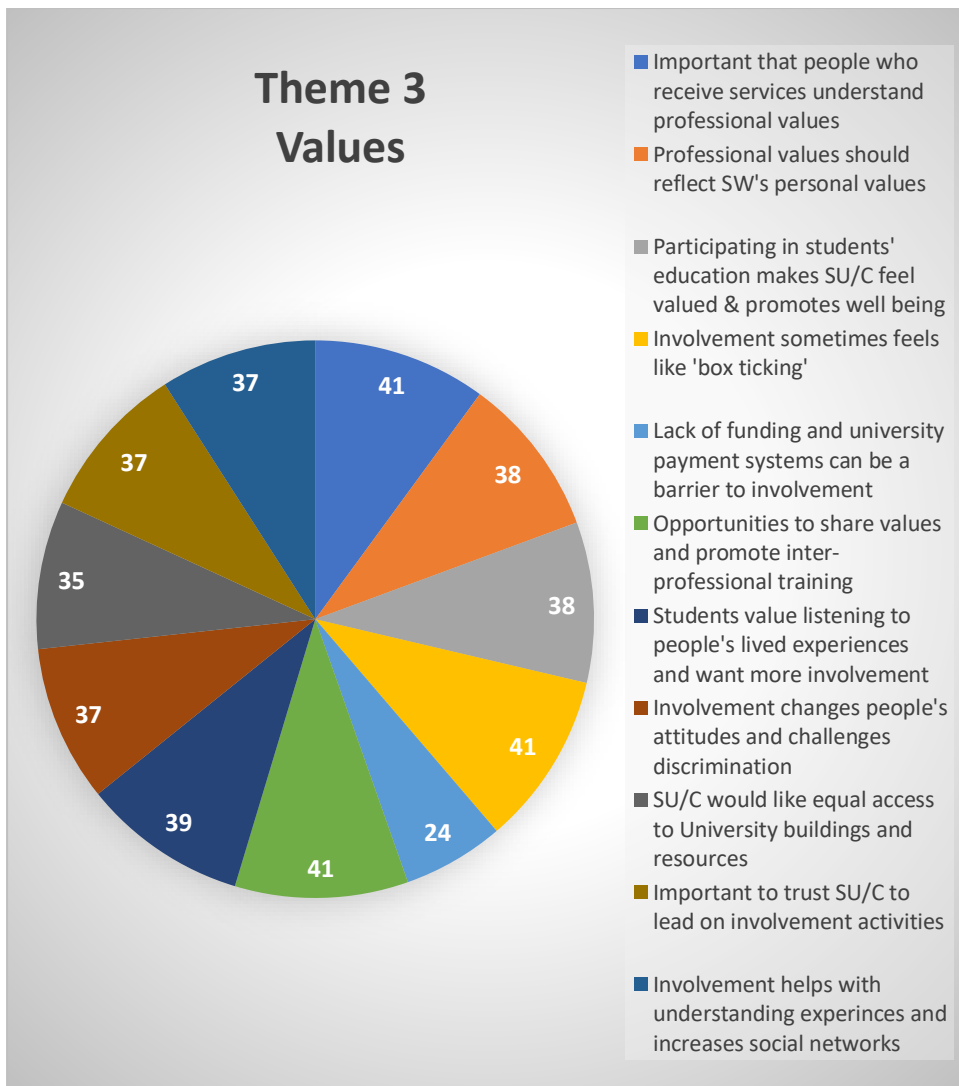
Figure seven

Theme 1 Involvement Activities

Legend:
- Most involvement occurs in first year
- Important students learn from lived experinces
- seminars and conferences
- Co-teaching
- prefer to teach without academics
- member of reference group
- portfolio assessment
- involvement in years two and three
- lack of purpose and clear structure
- lack of training to support involvement
- Fits with academic priorities not service users
- Involvement in same things every year

Values: 37, 37, 32, 26, 33, 23, 17, 22, 18, 1, 19, 16

(Participants 41)

Theme 2 Communication

(Participants 41)

Legend:
- Communication within Universities can be problematic — 33
- Service users/ carers are not always told what is expected of them — 18
- people have diverse support requirements e.g. interpretors — 41
- Feedback for all is important — 41
- Service users teaching commuciation skills prepares social workers — 38
- One lead academic is main contact for communication — 34
- How social workers introduce themselves is important — 41
- University financial systems are complicated for service users/carers — 20

Theme 3
Values

- Important that people who receive services understand professional values
- Professional values should reflect SW's personal values
- Participating in students' education makes SU/C feel valued & promotes well being
- Involvement sometimes feels like 'box ticking'
- Lack of funding and university payment systems can be a barrier to involvement
- Opportunities to share values and promote inter-professional training
- Students value listening to people's lived experiences and want more involvement
- Involvement changes people's attitudes and challenges discrimination
- SU/C would like equal access to University buildings and resources
- Important to trust SU/C to lead on involvement activities
- Involvement helps with understanding experinces and increases social networks

**Theme 4
Power**

(Participants 41)

Legend:
- Institutional power vs. personal power
- Academics decide on priorities for involvement
- Co-production means different things to different people
- SU/C should be involved in 50% of everything
- Co-production promotes learning on equal terms
- Involvement can be stopped by academics/government
- Sometimes service users have to be accompanied at meetings
- Lack of funding limits involvement
- There needs to be greater diversity of involvement
- Learning from experiential first hand knowledge changes power dynamics
- Professionals can be empowering in their practice
- Sharing experiences is humanising
- Service users and carers should take the lead over academics

Theme 5 Outcomes

(Participants 41)

Legend:
- Involvement is not outcome focussed
- Good idea to build in follow up evalautions in practice
- Increased confidence and skills transferable to other settings
- Outcomes hard to measure
- Limited evidence of structural change
- No evidence of policy change
- Experiential knowledge applies to range of educational settings
- Co-production can lead to transformation
- Learning from people's lived experiences better than learning from text books
- Experiential learning promotes new insights

Step 4:

In this phase I reviewed, modified and developed the preliminary themes that developed in stage 3. I read (and re - read) the data linked with the themes, then reviewed data under each theme to see whether the data extract supported them both within a single focus group and across focus group discussions. As before this was an iterative process, involving some re -coding and re visiting themes from the 'miscellaneous' list, with patterns amongst the data set becoming clearer revealing greater depth of data. At the end of this phase, I

had a good idea of the different themes and how they fit together to tell the story of the data.

Step 5:

Unlike the previous research method analysis whereby participant groups who met over eight weeks co-produced their own evaluations, focus group participants met for one research event. For this reason, I felt it was important to engage a peer researcher to review the codes, themes and sub themes to produce overarching themes which we came together to compare and discuss. Braun and Clarke recommend that another researcher examines codes and looks for themes as part of this process to ensure those identified are an accurate analysis of the data rather than interpretation of the main researcher:

"*High inter-rater reliability offers quality assurance that coding has successfully captured salient themes, which really are there. This consensus coding approach assumes a reality we can agree on, and reveal, through our TA endeavours*". (Braun and Clarke, 2016, p.3).

Essentially, we produced the same themes, with discussion revealing different emphasis in places which was an enlightening process; for example, we discussed the themes of power and communication in the context of the overarching importance of relationships. This is a further extension of the rigour of the framework. I could appreciate how the richness and depth of data was being realised by my fellow researcher and experienced the process working. Together we agreed on the names of the themes upon which I could base the final stage analysis.

Step 6: Producing the report.

The last stage was to write up the report. As this was the second metaphorical 'cake' I had baked from the different research data sets, I was mindful that themes selected provided different ingredients. However, the aim of the Reflexive TA recipe was the same; to make a strong argument in relation to the main research question that will inform the future direction of involving people with lived experiences in social work education.

4.4.3. Focus Group Research findings

Applying Reflexive TA to the focus group research data as described above revealed three core themes in relation to the main research question:

'*What difference does service user and carer involvement make in social work education?*'

1. **Involvement matters**

2. **It's all in the relationship**

3. **The sixty-million-dollar question**

1. *Involvement matters*

'I think when individuals have come into uni and talked to us about their experiences and things that's happened with them and their social workers whether it's good or bad, it's made me recognise how I want to be in my practice.' (FG4)

The values and principles of involvement were widely accepted as the most important features of social workers' training from the perspectives of all participants. Participants with lived experiences highlighted the importance of feeling valued, particularly when sharing experiences that had left them feeling de- valued. Statements made about the impact on students and practitioners predominantly highlighted how hearing people's experiences made them feel more determined to be a good social worker. It is interesting to think that students would think anything different to this, as this would surely be the basis of their decision and motivation to become a social worker. However, hearing people's experiences was clearly a moving experience as strong feelings of emotion were conveyed. One reason why hearing other people's experiences made such a strong impression is because they connected with their own. As a quote above illustrates, this can be spontaneous and take students by surprise.

What matters most about involvement is that it is meaningful. Reservations about involvement being tokenistic and ticking boxes was a key concern. Preparation and communication are central to making people feel welcome, informed, supported and clear about their role and contributions. This starts with the fundamentals of having an accessible environment, of which disabled participants shared varying experiences, as one participant sums up:

 'I *would go as far as to argue that how can you get to be effectively involved in things like interviewing, if you haven't sorted out how are you going to get service users here, how are you going to get them accessing the building?.. Making sure that the rooms are wheelchair accessible. X turned up to deliver a lecture with Y three weeks ago and was met with three steps up to the classroom. X has been part of this University since 2013 so they can't even get the fucking basics right, so it sort of feels to me like hold on, before we get ambitious about co-production, let's get some very basic things in place.'* (FG1).

Discussion about how an inclusive environment could be created, centred on people with lived experiences having equal status to staff when it came to accessing buildings and resources. For example, some people described having to wait at reception to be collected by a staff member which incurred unnecessary delays. The suggestion was made for passes to be issued, enabling people to access the building freely including the library. Further, it fulfilled an objective of my research, as introduced in chapter one, that the research process made a difference.

Many service users and carers shared their experiences of not knowing what to expect, either because they had not been briefed or because academics devised the content and expected people to slot in without prior communication. Examples shared included one participant's experience of being repeatedly invited to the same annual conference to contribute from their experience as a carer. As quoted in the earlier introduction to this section, she explained wanting to talk about the intersectionality of her experience as a black disabled female carer who has experienced discrimination on many levels, but the tight remit purely focussed on her caring role. Other examples illustrated how people were expected to fit in with academic expectations without any prior communication. As one group encountered, turning up with the plan to deliver a session 'free flow' were met with a request for their power- point presentation. This defined the university's expectations and

inhibited their own ideas for facilitating sessions with students. In these situations, participants who shared their experiences also picked up on the uncertainty held by students. Student participants explained how they were unsure how to make the best use of the opportunity to meet service users, as one student described the awkwardness of asking questions:

'When you've got 30 other students, I feel silly putting my hand up….. So, it gets to the point where I am chasing people down the corridor, but unless you can sit have a conversation, I think that's essential." (FG4).

Feedback was a consistent and important theme across focus groups. It was more common for students to give feedback to service users which was most appreciated, especially when it was informal and spontaneous. Where service users and carers gave feedback within university activities, this was usually with the communication skills/ role play assessment that first year students take. In some cases, this was the only encounter with a service user. One participant summarised the level of interest there is in finding out what students learn from them on placement:

'Can I ask…when you've come here and you've saw people like myself and other people with learning disabilities, how do you think we work with you? Like you've seen us work with you, how astonished are you by what we actually know?' (FG4)

To me this was an important straight forward question that gets to the core of my research; participants want to know what impression they are making and ultimately what impact they have on students. As picked up in a later theme, feedback from students could also be negative and critical which in one context had a damaging effect. This highlights the importance of training, support and preparation;

"…we got some pretty bad feedback to start with which you just take on the chin…. And it was because we didn't really have any training to prepare for people to be involved "(FG1).

Staying within a positive context, participants with lived experience explained how they endeavoured to convey mutual respect by also giving feedback to students. Opportunities for providing feedback to students varied according to the different activities people were engaged in. It was predominantly agreed that most involvement took place in university in

the first year, which varied widely from 'high levels of involvement' (FG5) to 'only meeting a service user once' (FG5). Participants' experiences were consistent with wider research that shows that most involvement takes place in the first year, mostly associated with student interviews and communication skills activities (Trevethick et al, 2004, Branfield et al 2007, and Beresford and Boxall, 2012). The focus of involvement discussed was in university education, however it also related to placements. Beyond the first year, placements were the main educational forum where students learned from service users. However, sometimes they did not feel prepared for their role. One participant who had not experienced involvement in education described encountering a challenging context with someone who had been imprisoned for his abusive actions against a child. A helpful response to this encounter highlighted the significance of learning from experience in preparation for placement:

'I think they have got to a point where they have been able to reflect on things and give you the learning you need, 'because that's the difficulty with being on placement you are in the thick of it aren't you? A lot of people, when you are in the thick of it, can't reflect on their learning, they just want to shout at you. The point is, we were lucky I guess, we had people who were able to reflect on that and tell you that they were angry to start with then they were like this and this happened, for us that was really interesting.' (FG5)

One student who stated having no experience of involvement in their education, felt that placements were the most significant learning opportunities;

'at uni doing the lectures and stuff like that, it did my head in but on placement that's when it all clicks and that's where you get your confidence up, I think and it's real life isn't it?' (FG5)

Notably by the end of the focus group discussion, as a quote at the beginning of this chapter captures, students with limited experience of university- based involvement came to appreciate that they had missed out on some key learning opportunities.

The various ways in which people are involved matters. A preference for co-working and co-production was strongly expressed by participants with lived experiences, though agreeing with academics what co-production meant was a subject for debate. The general view expressed was that co-production was not properly understood:

"So, whilst they talk of co-production what they talk about co-production and what we talk when we say co-production we may as well be talking a different language because when they talk co-production what they want to say is that we need to be able to say to the HCPC that we've done this……. unless we can both get on the same page about what co-production means, they may as well be talking about biology and we're talking about knitting. They may as well not be called the same things. I think that is what I find so frustrating is that they get away with calling that co-production and we keep on saying, can you just call that something else?" (FG1)

What really stood out from the views expressed within this theme, was how strongly people felt that co-production was the way forward. Some participants had experience of co-teaching which was a double-edged sword. It was positive in the sense that it was collaborative, but it was still held by an academic. What people wanted was to be given the freedom to co-design and deliver learning activities. One group had been inspired through engaging with the PowerUs network and shared experiences of 'their biggest venture into co-production' (FG 4) whereby students and service users and carers together, co-produced new knowledge and cultural insights. It was notable that people with lived experiences were driving the suggestions for co-production away from an academic dominated agenda; something that I shall come onto with the next theme. Student and practitioner participants were expected to facilitate co-production in accordance with the Care Act requirements (2014), previously set out in the literature review, yet they had no experience of this in an educational setting. This is a pertinent discussion point that I shall pick up on in the following chapter (five).

There is a clear tension expressed through the data between who should lead on involvement, i.e., people with lived experiences rather than academics. This supports research cited in chapter two, where a strong argument has been made for service user- led organisations to take a lead on involvement activities (Beresford, 2003, 2006, 2013, SCIE, 2003). This clear contrast in how people were involved with different expectations from academics demonstrated how variable people's experiences were, determined by who they were working with. (This is picked up in the second theme).

Involvement matters and because involvement matters, valuing involvement matters. The issue of funding is contentious, especially in Scotland where it was removed in 2009. One of

the strongest pieces of evidence to support how highly involvement is prioritised came from the Scotland group. Even though Government funding was removed to support and sustain involvement, the fantastic work continued with a very clear and simple purpose:

'The reason why we do it is because we are all keen to turn out good social workers' (FG3)

Funding is still in place in England and Wales, although how it is applied and the amount available is a debatable subject. Strong messages were conveyed about varying payment rates and inflexible university payment systems. I am aware from my own experience of administering a budget for service user and carer involvement, how inflexible payment systems can be and, how quickly money can be spent. Timely and realistic funding is required to make meaningful involvement work and is therefore picked up in the next chapter (five).

In summary, experiences of involvement vary widely, ranging from participants having no experience of involvement to quite a good amount in the first year of the social work course. Most involvement is with student interviews, communication skills assessments, sharing stories and experiences of social work support. Some participants engaged in co-teaching. Generally, participants felt that more support, preparation and training are required to meaningfully engage in activities planned by academics. It is felt to work best when people with lived experiences can take more ownership of involvement activities and incorporate co-production methods. The range of reasons why involvement matters came across most strongly in relation to feeling valued, promoting equality of opportunity to contribute to professional learning, utilising experience constructively and emphasising the human side of social work.

How that is achievable will be explored further within the next two themes.

2. *It's all in the Relationship.*

'We are here to help the students but coming to these meetings can help the person a lot. I live alone, I am very isolated, my house is very poor, my diet is very poor so coming to this situation, being able to talk with people and talk to students, that's counts a lot to me personally....what has made all the difference for me" (FG3)

The significance of building relationships was conveyed strongly. This included people with lived experiences building relationships together, commonly forming a reference group or support network, as well as building relationships with students and staff. Creating a warm environment was clearly an important part of feeling valued and more importantly feeling equal with students and academic staff. In one context participants had access to a university staff room where they were made to feel welcome and engaged in conversations with academic staff. In another context, establishing creative environments enabled people with lived experience to interact with students in an equal and different way

"*When we were working with the plasticine it was really good …and they would sit down… and start a conversation and it was different because it was just like a normal conversation. We don't normally get chance to do that get that because we were always showing them something but this time, we were just having a wee conversation and were playing…and it was nice*" (FG3).

The quality of the relationship between social workers and service users has been a subject of research interest for decades. The impact of Mayer and Timms (1970) seminal work 'The Client Speaks', was explored in chapter two. Also introduced was one of the earliest most influential texts on this subject; 'The Casework relationship' by Felix Beistek (1957). Biestek placed focus on the dynamic interaction of attitudes between the caseworker and client, with the aim of 'helping the client to achieve a better adjustment between himself and the environment' (p, 17). Studies since, have emphasised key qualities that centre on communication skills which have been summarised by SCIE (2004) as personal attributes of a social worker, i.e., 'empathy, warmth courage, openness, honesty, reliability and consistency and care and concern'. What is interesting is that there is no mention of 'equality' in this list. SCIE go on to identify the professional attributes of a social worker, i.e., knowledge, skills, professional boundaries, social work values and professional ethics. Again, neither explicitly nor implicitly does this recognise equality within the relationship. Beresford has concluded that the word to sum up what most people want from health and social care services is 'listening' (Beresford, 2005). My research brings a new dimension to this picture, as the strongest message that came from analysing the theme of relationships was 'equality'. Participants with lived experiences want equality in the relationship which was strongly supported by students. Achieving this involves balancing power or more often

relinquishing power. Power inherent within relationships and services was highlighted along with a shared sense of experiencing a shift in power since people with lived experiences became involved in social work training:

"*I have to say that the interaction I had this year with social workers with my mum was different in a way because the social worker, she had a greater understanding of this, it's about the person it's not 'that's how it is' and 'that will do' . I was quite pleased to see that but that hasn't happened across the board and I'm really hoping that co-production will make a difference across the board because every social worker should be the best they can be. And if we can help that then I think it has to carry on*". (FG2)

As picked up in the previous theme, the message most strongly conveyed for achieving a better balance of power was through co-producing knowledge. Yet for some, achieving power within the relationship between people with lived experiences and university staff was like shifting sands and often comes down to a relationship with one lecturer:

"*It's been very bitty and I would go as far as to say at X (university) although there have been these gradual steps towards where we want to go, that's been driven by us, they can't take credit for any of that at all. I say that with all the love in my heart, genuinely they don't have a vision for service user involvement, it's kind of tacked onto the end of some social work academic's job who is already being run ragged sorting out a module they've got to do. They've not really got a passion for it in the sense that they don't really understand it, so what happens is you get somebody like Y who really gets it and whenever Y's around it happens, the minute Y's gone it just disintegrates into nothing so you can't say you become part of the fabric of an organisation. It kind of sits in the intellectual space of one academic whose hobby horse it is.*" (FG1)

Where people had previously felt part of the fabric of an organisation this was a precarious position as they discovered that a change in staff can change everything. I think this really adds to the perspective of why reference groups and support networks are so important; the strength of the relationships between people and the support they receive from each other and the university is a life - line for some. Building trust together helped group members with their confidence and ability to carry on when they felt let down by the university:

"how this other group came about was because we had been doing that for all these years then one year there was a bit of a change of staff and we had a difficult year of students and some students wrote things that weren't so nice ……Some people left the group they were so upset that they done it all these years and the students had been so happy and it had been this thing that they had developed it, they were so passionate about it, they left. They really felt so let down by the University, however the students said they ' didn't like what was happening' they wanted something better, so out of that very quickly has come this new unit which service users and carers are very enthusiastic about but there was a terrible feeling of being let down" (FG3)

Relationships with universities were also a huge source of support.

"Over the years it's been a huge improvement to my confidence. One of the great things about X University is that there have been a few occasions when I've just had to drop out and people have said, when you feel better to come back in ,then I've been able to come back in and that was a great aspect of the university" (FG3).

Whilst this presents quite a mixed picture, in my view the definitive message conveyed was how much stronger relationships can be when support, decision-making and learning is shared. Building relationships starts with the fundamentals of good communication skills. Poor experiences of relationships with social workers underpinned to a large extent what motivated people to be involved and how learning can be passed on to students:

"They (social workers) *used to be a wee bit poor in their personality changes. I've noticed that journey in my life…. So, someone came in once and said hi X I'm* …first name. *I warmed to him straight away…if someone comes in and says I am Mr… I'm your social worker I'm not interested. If he touches my heart…it changes the whole thing*." (FG3).

In summary, power seems to be the thread running through everything. It can be woven carefully into the fabric of the environment by inviting people with lived experiences to take a lead and ownership of their involvement or it can be tacked on to an academic's role. If people come together to co-create the pattern, then something unique can be co-produced rather than continually reproducing the same outputs. This is how people with lived experience can become part of the fabric of the university. The higher quality experience comes from investing in relationships as one participant summarised:

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"Because we work with people the key is relationships, it's absolutely nothing without relationships I think the more you work with that the more chance you have with understanding people"(FG2).

3. The 'Sixty Million Dollar' Question.

"What we don't have is feedback on research on what people are doing in three to five years' time. People who've had that training. Has it changed their attitudes? That's what we're missing."(FG3)

The final theme captures the essence of the question central to research discussion. This was agreed as a pertinent question and one which people wanted to see built into continuing professional development processes. Participants agreed that measuring impact should be built into processes from the outset, acknowledging that if the structure for involvement was not clear then it followed that there was not a clear framework for evaluating the impact of involvement. All participants with lived experiences said they would love to know what students thought about in their practice that related to learning from them. This was precisely the conversations I was having with those who inspired me to undertake a PhD and conduct this research. It was also a pertinent question for the research process. As noted earlier, feedback was very important as it was clearly beneficial to individuals, also with effecting change on courses as an academic participant explained:

"There's kind of a constant evaluation in terms of input. We look at the student feedback and we take notes from it and take it on board and it's very important to you guys that we do that. ….so, we have our revalidation coming up, so they are directly involved in that. You're involved in selection, you've changed the selection process, you had the case studies, and we adjust that each year. You helped decide what the law input should be, you decide what the law should be in terms of the legislation so that's new. That only started last year so that's new. Just at the end of the teaching on health and disability, we ask is there something you want to add? We have talked a lot about people's experiences of panic attacks because we have been doing that for so long, just today we talked about bi-polar, so there is kind of a constant; what are we doing, how are we doing it, how could we do things better?".(FG3)

Whilst this clearly demonstrates a meaningful commitment to ensuring that people with lived experience influence the curriculum, it also highlights a tension that it is academic led.

"…for someone to be in charge of it and to kind of say ' this is what we are doing' on the other hand the problem with structuring it , is that it moves far away from co-production because if somebody is leading it from the front, therefore it's not really about co-production. It feels like a box to be ticked, I think that those two tensions are inherent in the whole area of service user involvement because the thrust of service user involvement in as far as my understanding of the whole thing is that it came from the service user movement saying, 'you need to involve us' and it's now turned into, 'you need to involve us in these different ways'."(FG1)

I picked up on the message that this is the challenge for academics. I identified with the positive feelings the academic participants conveyed about wanting to make sure that everyone (students, service users and carers) had the opportunity to comment on what was being decided and adjust accordingly. However, what was strongly conveyed was that this is an academic led strategy. It raised the question of how different involvement could be if we radically rethink the curriculum and how strategically it could be led by those for whom the impact of social work matters most. An outcome of my research informed by this discussion was to co-write a chapter with two of the focus group participants with lived experiences who felt most passionate about revisioning social work from a radical co-productive perspective. I shall pick up on this in the following discussion chapter as it underpins the recommendations for making structural changes. Analysis of this theme here, demonstrates how such ideas were formulated towards making clear recommendations for change.

One message conveyed throughout discussion was of people invariably feeling confused about the purpose of involvement. I suggest this this also points to the need for an evaluation structure, to pick up on such experiences. For example, reflecting upon assessment processes evoked the following response:

"Assessing communication skills … I'd failed it because it felt so unnatural waiting around downstairs, you had to go into a room and make small talk. I remember being fuming thinking, this isn't natural, what the hell, is this a pass or a fail? X got me to do it again.

Looking back now, it's not natural, we have never spoken to service users before, and you have to start from scratch". (FG5)

Of course, reflective snapshots cannot fully report how this was organised and if this person's experience was in common or in complete contrast to other students. But it is interesting that this was the one experience that stood out for an experienced social worker.

An alternative perspective was conveyed of the positive impact sharing service user's experiences had on students, particularly with enabling students to connect to their own experiences.

"*I had a student two years ago at one of the workshops, I was talking about my experiences when I was a child and he came over and said now he can understand what his wife had went through, they were similar things to what I went through, so my story has given him more understanding of what his wife went through so your able to put back….and be a different person with it*". (FG3)

People seemed to really like the human connection made through sharing experiences and identifying common ground between each other. I felt this gave a strong message about wanting to have more opportunities for promoting mutual respect and learning from each other. I shall develop this aspect of my analysis further in the following discussion chapter.

In summary the answer to the sixty-million-dollar question is that involvement does make a difference in a wide range of ways. Key outcomes of how involvement makes a difference, identified within focus groups includes; confidence building, reducing isolation, increasing social networks, employment, making constructive use of experience, feeling valued, increased knowledge and learning from experience, influencing social work curriculum, participating in conferences and events. Focus group participants would like to see clearer structures for ensuring that measuring the effectiveness of involvement is built into education from the outset continuing into professional practice.

4.4.4. Summary

Exploration of the three themes above demonstrates what is required for the meaningful involvement of people with lived experiences in social work education and the difference

involvement makes for participants who have largely contributed to university /academic led activities. The thematic analysis presents interesting findings which demonstrates the importance of the research subject and high value placed upon service user and carer involvement. In my view it sends a clear message that there are significant benefits to involvement. However, there are also significant changes that could be made to strengthen, improve and support the equality of opportunity and participation by incorporating a co-production/outcome focussed approach. Applying reflexive thematic analysis has enabled me to identify pertinent themes to inform recommendations for re-structuring social work education.

To conclude this chapter, the main learning from the triangulated data is identified. The areas of commonalities and differences are elucidated to inform the key recommendations from my research in the following discussion chapter.

4.4.5 Overall analysis and Conclusion.

The value of incorporating two methods in the research has generated rich data sets which have been rigorously and relevantly applied to reflexive thematic analysis, yielding meaningful and illuminating results overall . This demonstrates the robustness of the study which has been explained more thoroughly in chapter three and can be summarised thus:

"The intent of using triangulation is to decrease, negate, or counterbalance the deficiency of a single strategy, thereby increasing the ability to interpret the findings". (Thurmond, 2001, p.1.)

What is interesting at this point of analysis are the areas for agreement as well as areas for divergence within the two methods. The commonalities and key differences are summarised below. The implications of these are discussed in the next chapter.

One of the first observations to make is in relation to **participants**. Service user participants in focus groups all had experience of involvement in university- based social work education. Many participants had also contributed to other professional educational courses, particularly health and medicine. In contrast, most Mend the Gap project participants with lived experiences had no experience of involvement in university courses.

The nature of these projects enabled the most marginalised research participants to take a lead role. What is particularly significant about this is that it presents a method that demonstrates how to include those who have traditionally been identified as less visible or 'seldom heard' in university curricula. This mends a gap in the research base which tends to debate the exclusion of marginalised individuals and groups from social work education more than identifying how to redress this.

A further observation to make relates to the charts presented in the previous chapter, depicting the balance of participation between the two research approaches. To re-cap, within the mend the gap projects there was a total of thirty-six participants with lived experiences, twenty students, five practitioners, two project managers and no academics. Within focus groups there were twenty-seven participants with lived experiences, five students, five practitioners, one project manager and three academics. The engagement of service users and carers in both research projects is significant; the greater investment of student engagement was four times more in the participatory approach is particularly interesting. To me this demonstrates how enthusiastic students are about engaging in experiential learning. Particularly when for many students this meant attending weekly sessions on a Saturday or during study time. Although numbers were similar for involving qualified social workers notably, they were particularly low when it came to involving academics. Whilst this could have come down to the timings of the research groups clashing with teaching or marking schedules, I think the distinctly lower level of interest from academics in complete contrast to people with lived experiences is a clear indication of where the investment of time and engagement really lies. I shall expand upon this preposition in the next chapter.

The **themes** decided upon from the distinct data sets were similar. Overall, the key messages demonstrate the importance of the quality of relationships with emphasis placed on different features of relationships. Mend the Gap TA emphasised this in the context of promoting partnership working through ensuring people are informed about their rights. Focus group TA place emphasis on the support between people in reference groups as well as the relationships they have with students and professionals. I felt there was a common undertone of emotions conveyed through both data sets. A Mend the Gap theme conveyed feelings of fear and empowerment. A focus group theme conveyed feelings around why

involvement matters underpinned by the values placed upon this. Both data sets identified the importance of outcomes. From Mend the Gap this was clearly linked to the beneficial outcomes that can come from sharing experiential knowledge. From the focus groups there was a strong message of frustration about how outcomes could be achieved if learning was co-produced. The combined research data presented a clear case for more comprehensive co-produced learning in social work education.

What is most important about the data analysis overall, is that it contributes new knowledge to the current field of research and literature, impacting upon social work education. I shall expand on how I feel my research has demonstrated this in the next discussion chapter, not least because of the legacies that have been created throughout the research process. Before closing this chapter, I wish to make one final observation which will inform my recommendations in the next. My own reflexive analysis came through most strongly with considering the Mend the Gap data. As I wrote up the themes at the end of each one, I reflected on what that had meant for me. As a participant in the research, I shared many emotions expressed by others. Even though my own experience of having used mental health services more than three decades ago felt far apart from the hardship participants were experiencing here and now, I felt a deeper connection with my own experiences through sharing a space where everyone was open to self – reflection. This I realised, is how to cross boundaries that are (ironically) created and perpetuated by those in more powerful positions seeking to empower those in receipt of support. My own silence as a professional has contributed to maintaining such boundaries. I suggest that when we come together as people with lived experiences, we transcend boundaries and are open to new insight.

 In contrast, I did not reflect on my own experiences in the same way when considering the focus group data. One obvious reason would be due to not spending much time with focus group participants, however I suggest the main difference is with the methodology. As it has been addressed in the literature review, there is no single model for taking a PAR approach. I have demonstrated through my research how Mend the Gap is an innovative model which can promote transformative outcomes in social work education that is central to achieving the purpose and vision for social work, social workers and those with lived experience. The next chapter will discuss how my research demonstrates the capacity and

potential for co-produced learning in social work. I argue this is key to providing a broader range of professional insights, develop critical learning skills and understanding through exchanging knowledge within diverse contexts with people with lived experience.

Chapter Five: Discussion.

5.1 Introduction.

In this concluding chapter the research findings are applied to the task of answering the primary question posed at the beginning of the project:

What difference does the involvement of service users and carers make in social work education?

My thesis based on the research outcomes, identifies a strong signal for a change in educational structures towards participatory and co-produced learning. The gaps in the literature to which my research contributes to are identified. The scope of study is reviewed and the methodological design evaluated with the limitations discussed. The rhetoric or reality of involvement is discussed in relation to new insight gained. My own reflections as a reflexive researcher inform recommendations made for social work educators and potentially other educational contexts and possible directions for future research. Ultimately, a strong argument is made for taking transformative steps towards improving the quality and equality of social work education to a new strategic level. The Mend the Gap approach founded on experiential knowledge, is presented as a model for inclusion in social work and potentially other professional education curricula.

The impact of my research which will be explored is based on:

- Disrupting conventional assumptions
- Changing perspectives on 'expert' knowledge and the value of experiential knowledge
- Developing unique learning content
- The benefits of substantive mutual learning.

Theories of power and oppression have underpinned the research, the necessity of which is highlighted in the following quotes:

"If social work does not take a different approach to the production and use of power, it is likely to fall victim to a cyclical process of defensive but ineffective realignment in the face of recurrent shock and outrage at periodic, high profile and tragic failures".(Smith, 2010, 9.2)

"Contributing to structuring the environment whereby there is more likely to be trust than distrust, where prisoners feel safe to disclose is in and of itself a crucial contribution. Professionally it can be difficult to challenge those in authority, but sometimes speaking truth to power is a key role of the practitioner psychologist"

(Towl and Walker 2015, p.886)

The two preceding quotes reflect different professional contexts; social work within the context of safeguarding children and psychology within the context of suicide prevention in prisons. Yet both focus on changing environments, where the balance of power is redressed to prevent incidents of abuse and loss of life. A key aim of this research is to demonstrate the transferability of the research findings to other professional contexts.

Two of the authors of the quotes; – Roger Smith and Graham Towl, have been my supervisors throughout my PhD. As accomplished qualitative researchers, they have guided me to expand my thinking on the conceptual basis for conducting the research and developing unique learning content. Together their encouragement has given me the confidence to disrupt conventional assumptions in contexts where experiential knowledge can be transformative. Another aim of this research is to demonstrate how this can be achieved by presenting new evidence of the difference that participatory learning can make.

I propose that my research adds to such perspectives by exploring a question that has attracted a lot of interest but is recognised as largely under- explored within social work education and research. The key to addressing this question is a fundamental proactive change to power dynamics, putting those most marginalised and discriminated in society in control of setting the agenda for involvement within education and continuing professional development. This thesis presents new evidence and a new approach to involvement on equal terms with those supporting them which could transfer to a wide range of contexts. The distinctive contribution of my research is that it introduces an innovative model for social work education that is outcome focussed. A thorough and robust evidence base is presented of the changes that have taken place as a result of co-creating knowledge with people who have felt excluded from contributing to mainstream educational and societal systems. As key speakers at an international social science research seminar recently emphasised:

"Progress lies in critical consciousness of the nature of the tools we use and, in the use of international strategies to disrupt or undercut the normalcy of the knowledge they produce."
(Institute for Social Science Research, 2019, p.1)

I believe that the impact of my research, builds on existing research and leaves a legacy that has the potential to shape the development of social science research as well as educational structures. I begin by clarifying how my research advances understanding of the original problem.

Application of the findings to the research question.

Undertaking an epistemological review led to the identification of the knowledge gap which helped to determine the methodology for acquiring knowledge as an essential part of my field preparation. Although I had pre- determined to introduce Mend the Gap as the main innovation of my research, working through triangulated methodology to ensure trustworthiness and validity of the study (as delineated in chapter 3), challenged me as a researcher , especially with managing complex data sets. This is discussed in later reflection on the study design and limitations.

5.2 Outcome focussed involvement; rhetoric or reality?

This research set out with the overall aim to understand the impact of involvement in social work education. The findings reveal a strong commitment from participants to involvement. Participants contributing from their lived experiences spoke of the wider therapeutic benefits of involvement. The strong association that participants made with improved mental health outcomes has opened new insight for me into how greater self –and collective-efficacy can be achieved through meaningful engagement. Bandura (1997) defined 'self- efficacy' as beliefs about one's ability to organise and execute courses of actions required to produce specific performance attainments.' This concept has become central to psychological and educational discourse about competencies, confidence and behaviour (Cervone et al, 2004). I feel this individual benefit is most important in demonstrating that involving people in educating professionals improves personal self-efficacy. Further, my research highlights collective efficacy, whereby personal motivation

was shared with others to identify mutual aims. Bandura (1997) defined collective efficacy as 'a group's shared belief in its conjoint capability to organise and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainment' (p.477). This concept has had a significant impact on education and research (Yaakobi and Weisberg, 2018). Beck et al (2012) have developed strategies for bringing collective efficacy into social work practice to prevent neighbourhood violence. Drawing from the literature on community practice and peace- making criminology their research stands out as most useful to building community relations, values and trust. While this article contributes to the growing body of literature on collective efficacy within neighbourhoods (Hipp and James, 2015, Sampson, 2006) it stands out further to me as a subject not commonly explored in relation to social work practice and therefore a concept for further research in relation to participatory learning in social work education. I take note at this point of Hipp (2016) who warns against social scientists adopting the concept with the wholesale view that all things good are collective efficacy; 'To utilize the important insights of collective efficacy it is useful to consider carefully what this construct really implies and how it should be measured', to avoid creating 'conceptual murkiness and stunting theoretical development' (p.32). The new insight gained in collective efficacy from my research is a good starting point for future exploration.

Almost all of the student and qualified social worker research participants experienced involvement in their education. Of course, the measure of a successful intervention is not based on whether everyone has had the same level of exposure. As explored in the literature review, levels of involvement have varied across universities. However, one observation is that those who had not met service users and carers in their university based educational journey, gained knowledge of the benefits during focus group discussion and ultimately expressed having 'missed out' in their learning. When qualified social workers in one focus group heard about the rich learning other social workers had from people's lived experiences, they realised this was a different type of learning. That said, the same could be argued where involvement was limited to a small range of first year activities.

It is not the purpose of my research to identify any university courses in particular, it being the role of the Social Work regulators to evaluate this professional standard against individual courses. However, some interesting points can be drawn from exploring involvement in different parts of the UK and from applying different research approaches.

The key point to note is the difference between evidence of outcomes from focus group participants and Mend the Gap projects. Outcomes from focus groups were predominantly orientated around promoting understanding, support, and wellbeing. Outcomes from Mend the Gap projects changed policy and services to better reflect the priorities and concerns people have. This provides an evidence base of how reality over rhetoric is possible when involvement is outcome focussed. When outcomes are not clear from the beginning, for example, when people aren't prepared and don't know what their role is or don't feel they have a role that is equal to academics who determine the activities, the outputs of involvement are limited, and rhetoric is perpetuated. I propose that a clear strategy is necessary to ensure that involvement is clearly planned and supported, incorporating rigorous evaluation methods. I shall return to this with later recommendations for taking a Mend the Gap approach forward.

5.3 Reflection on scope of study.

Graphs have been included in an earlier chapter (three), depicting the numbers and diversity of research participants within each method. The aim of the Mend the Gap projects was to achieve a balance of people at the receiving end of support and those in support provision roles. However, academics were under- represented which I suggest is an indication of how they prioritise their time. Academic participation in focus groups was better which may have been due to the fact that the focus groups were less of a time commitment, which is not to detract at all from the fact that those who engaged were highly committed to involvement and research. The balance of participation in focus groups was outweighed in the same order as the Mend the Gap projects, demonstrating the greater commitment that those contributing from their lived experiences of social work have to involvement. Notably, Mend the Gap projects which placed greater demand on people's time attracted much higher student interest. Analysis of the research data reflects the reason for this commitment was due to students wanting to experience a new and equal learning approach. That is, one that led to transformative outcomes through collaborative engagement. Interestingly, an equivalent number of qualified social workers were involved in both research methods. I felt this demonstrated the high value social worker participants placed upon professional development and especially being open to innovative learning

methods and research. I deduce that the greater commitment of time and contribution to the research projects reflected greater commitment to involvement from people who have experienced (or are eligible to) social work support. This is interesting to consider that in contrast, those who must incorporate this standard within their professional learning are arguably less committed to university based involvement activities.

The scope of the study promoted diversity in research participation which builds on current literature on under-representation addressed in chapter two. It has been explored earlier (in chapter three) how intersectionality and critical theory have underpinned the research to advance insight through experiential knowledge. This came across most strongly with PAR projects perhaps not surprisingly by including those with a history of being most marginalised. By seeking to redress the balance of power between people, a controversial topic within PAR research debates (Cook 2012, Rose D, 2018), I believe that a key aim of this thesis was achieved. I ensured that PAR principles were implemented such that participants as 'equal partners' not 'subjects', highlighted the intersections of people's experiences.

All focus group participants had experience of university based involvement in social work education. On the other hand, most service user participants from Mend the Gap projects had no prior experience and were involved for the first time as part of the research process. The first point to make about this difference is that focus group participants have a level of confidence to be able to enter a classroom and meet students. This is not to minimise the level of anxiety and support some individuals may need to be able to do this, however, it contrasts starkly with participants who could never have imagined being invited let alone having the confidence to enter this context. The research findings have demonstrated how the Mend the Gap approach is inclusive of people who feel the most fear as well as discrimination of professionals. As Rath has observed; 'collaborative research with people who have a history of marginalisation is only possible based on trust' (Rath, 2012).

Further contrast of experiences was demonstrated by student and social worker participants. There was a clear difference of experiences of levels of involvement with those in the focus groups:

- Minimal experience; amounting to one experience of meeting a service user for a ten-minute communication skills assessment.

- Some; meeting a service user or carer at interview, communication skills assessment and listening to someone tell their story in a class.

- Good; previous identified involvement plus a diverse range of adult speakers on course.

- Very good; all that has previously been identified including meeting children /young people and adults, plus having the opportunity to participate in a Mend the Gap course and in conferences with service users and carers.

In contrast, students and social workers on Mend the gap projects had equivalent opportunities. Whatever different experiences they may have had at university, by committing to participating in a shared learning journey alongside service users and carers for six to eight weeks, a much more level playing field was established so that all felt they had engaged in mutual and meaningful learning.

5.4 Key learning and recommendations.

   1. **Terminology**

Current research identifies the importance of using respectful language in accordance with people's wishes (Beresford 2005, McLaughlin in McLaughlin et al, 2021). Whilst acknowledging the positive developments with terminology, it continues to categorise people in their distinct roles. 'Service user', 'expert by experience' and 'client' clearly identify the person being helped as does 'carer' to varying degrees, with the opposite category for social worker clearly identifying the 'expert' professional role. Although there has been a move towards referring to people 'with lived experience' I suggest this is also mostly associated with those at the receiving end of support and services. Whilst focus group discussion generally remained within this frame of reference, positive practice was identified to illustrate how participants in opposite roles sought to work in partnership. In Mend the Gap projects the sharing of experiences and participatory methodology promoted an openness to learning from each other which broke down the categories that maintain people in their distinct roles. Reflections shared by all participants placed value on the 'human' side of social work, emphasising the importance of building relationships and trust rather than focus on specific professional skills. I have changed my own position on terminology in light of this as I have experienced not only how gaps can be minimised in this

way but also how boundaries can be transcended. (This has increased reflexive awareness of my own lived experiences of mental health services, discussed later) That is, when those in professional roles, traditionally seen to hold power over those they support, are willing to share their own experiences of struggles, new insight is gained. Such new insight has led me to use the terminology of 'people contributing from their lived experiences' which applies to all who have experiences of receiving services or have experienced discrimination or disadvantage. It is interesting to consider further how many people may be motivated to study social work because of their own life experiences, yet not have the opportunity to share these. In presenting my own interpretation of this learning, it is necessary to consider this in relation to other research that has begun to address how peoples' career choices are informed by their life experiences. I shall then go on to identify recommendations for developing terminology.

2. Applying lived experience in social work.

The significance of life experience as a factor informing career choice for social work students was introduced in chapter two (Christie and Weeks , 1998).This has been deemed as the point whereby candidate's with lived experience of social work services have their ability to move from 'receiver' to 'helper' assessed (McLennan in McGregor, 2010).Interestingly, my research concurred with other research (conducted by SCIE, 2012) which found that interviewing applicants is one of the most common activities where people contributing from their lived experiences are involved. Almost all focus group participants had experiences of involvement in the interview processes, although the detail of the various types of involvement was not gathered. SCIE (2012) has presented some positive findings about the meaningful involvement of service users and carers within recruitment and selection processes whereby they interviewed students 'as equal partners' with academics. In my own experience of interviewing students over the years, I have not found this easy to achieve with academics and continue to argue for the equal involvement of service users and carers within interview processes. I propose that it is necessary to reflect upon what separates us in our roles to look for connections. I suggest this is a longer process than demonstrating emotional resilience based on having lived experiences of social work support at interview. Although interviews are a good starting point for making connections between roles.

An important part of social work student's learning journey is to build emotional resilience (Hardy, 2017, Bunce, 2019), which could include connecting with ones' own lived experiences and others. A recent example of this was highlighted from a webinar discussion about practical ways of 'decolonising social work' (January 2021, Durham University). One speaker said that creating spaces within universities where lived experiences of discrimination could be shared, would help to promote a more culturally diverse and understanding environment, building student's confidence as they prepare for social work practice. Hearing the webinar speaker suggest the need for universities to create spaces for students to talk about their lived experiences felt like a classroom window opening to bring in some fresh new perspective on this subject. Broadening the concept of those with lived experiences to include students adds a new perspective to a wider more inclusive definition. It also points towards creating an educational culture that supports the emotional resilience of students. To me this is a key point for enhancing terminology as discussed in chapters one and two that my research builds upon.

Recently it was pointed out to me that the term 'lived experiences can only apply to 'service users' and not 'carers'. Interesting to think where these categories come from, who imposes them and what counts as a 'lived experience'. The Lived Experience network defines its aim to 'celebrate change-makers who have used their lived experiences to pioneer, drive and lead positive changes in society' (Sandhu, 2017). In contrast the lived experience NHS network is for health professionals to learn from patient lived experiences. We could surely get into the same semantics earlier explored. Shaping Our Lives straightforwardly distinguishes people with' lived experiences of using services' (Meakin and Matthews, 2015). I would take this a step further. What I suggest that unites everyone is having a lived experience of receiving a service, some form of structural oppression or discrimination. If someone has experienced a racist attack, that may not have led to any service support or intervention, but it would not count any less of an experience than one that did. I therefore propose that by applying the term 'contributing from lived experience' in the education context, common ground for sharing experiential knowledge is opened to include anyone with experiences of using services, discrimination, and disadvantage.

Fook (2002, p,89) proposed that one way to deconstruct the view of an institutionalised practice is by letting the narratives of the service users show alternative ways to understand

what works and what does not. Adopting this approach with Black Asian and Minority Ethnic students could open new insights into institutional racism, enriching insight that is founded on experiential knowledge. There were many examples shared by research participants that illustrate how greater recognition and inclusion of all who wish to contribute their lived experiences within an educational environment, is a good starting point for breaking down the barriers people face.

PAR conducted in the Netherlands introduced in chapter two (Weerman and Abma, 2019) trained students to use their experiential knowledge as a professional social worker. This thought provoking research highlighted how students' experienced some conflict with using their experiential knowledge in relation to managing the expectations of a social worker as a detached professional expert, concluding that:

"*Profiling oneself as a social worker with existential knowledge of recovery has paradoxical aspects: it may weaken shame and combat stigmatisation but may reinforce stigma as well*" (ibid, p.1).

This research was conducted as PAR with social work students only. It did not involve external mental health service users. In contrast, other recent research conducted by Wilberforce et al (2020) used a 'best-worst' scaling approach with over one hundred adult mental health service users about their experiences of social workers. Hence, evolving is developing experiential knowledge to improve education and practice, using a focus on *either* students' experiences *or* service users. This is further demonstration of how my research adds a new approach to existing and emerging evidence by presenting a Mend the Gap approach for social work education inclusive of everyone's experiential knowledge.

As noted earlier, (chapter two) Fook guides practitioners to adopt critical reflection to give recognition to the whole person (Fook, 2002, Askeland and Fook, 2009). I suggest that one way for students to become critically reflective practitioners is through co-creating a learning environment where they can be open about their lived experiences. The emphasis on 'professionalism' within social work education, conveys a sense of being in control, holding power to make decisions. This contrasts hugely with feeling out of control and not

having power which are the vulnerable identities many with lived experiences of using services have. I suggest that it is this conflict that needs to be redressed beyond critical reflection towards developing epistemic justice in the professional education context.

From the literature search, I concluded that this is an under explored research subject. One that should be extended beyond students and applied to the academic context to include lecturers who may also have lived experiences they may welcome the opportunity to share. There is a vast amount of literature on the dilemmas of when it is appropriate for a student or practitioner to disclose their experience, with the focus of debate being on how purposeful such a disclosure would be to the service user, how much this conveys empathy and how it risks having a negative impact (Urdang, 2010, Knight, 2012, Kaushik, 2017). One social worker speaking frankly about such a dilemma explained that when asked by a father if he had a partner, he did not respond for fear of being 'too informal' in the professional relationship. He summarised the 'practice dilemma' thus.

 'How can I expect families to share personal intimate stories from their lives but then freeze when I am asked in return?' (Mathews, 2018)

Concluding that*; "it is important to remember that social workers are not robots; we are humans working with humans considering deeply emotive issues. The responsibility invested in the role leads itself to be challenging, if we have supportive structures around us to continually be thinking curiously then we can hopefully be of help to children and families. "* (ibid).

Research participants from Mend the Gap emphasised the human nature of the participatory approach. Creating supportive structures in education where students can be more open about their lived experiences could better prepare them for encountering 'practice dilemmas' when asked a question based on human nature.
This is not restricted to students; service user focus group research participants expressed similar experiences of academics as with other professionals, clearly defining a divide whereby academics retain the power and decision making over their involvement. People described being treated less equally by not having the same access rights into university

buildings. I feel confident in suggesting that academics are not consciously excluding people and genuinely believe that by engaging those with lived experiences of services within education, they are promoting meaningful partnership working. However, the research findings suggest that often this is not always the case. Thus, a key aim of this thesis is to recommend ways that meaningful engagement can be achieved , by listening to what participants from this research are spelling out they want, that is; co-production, equal rights and involvement throughout, which introduces the next discussion point.

3. Co-production in social work education.

The various interpretations of co-production have been explored in the literature review. It is interesting to consider that co-production is a key concept in public services, yet social work students may not be prepared in their education for taking this forward in a transformative way. As one participant succinctly stated:

"*Because we have never been taught about co-production, we think it is about doing things like making tea together. Finding out about changing the contact supervision policy with a social service manager is a whole new level. That's what we should be learning about together*". (FG5).

 A strong message from focus groups, was that social work students are taught about legislation which includes specific reference to co-production although awareness of how this is put into practice is limited. Also conveyed was that those participants contributing from their lived experiences generally have better understanding of co-production than students. Themes from focus group data analysis demonstrated how in favour people were of taking co-productive approaches but overall participation was limited to one off activities, dominated by an academic agenda. Participants of focus groups had varied experiences of co-production ranging from implementing a project, based on the Mend the Gap approach, to providing lectures and in one context, innovating student placements based on co-production. These are great examples of what is possible to co-create given the right environment and support. At the other end of the spectrum some student and social work participants in focus groups stated having never experienced co-production or had a good awareness and understanding of the concept. Where participants had experience of co-

production, they were strongly in favour of promoting this approach in social work education in a transformative way.

An additional pertinent and rather devastating factor is the removal of funding in Scotland. To see the strength of commitment to involvement and co-production from service users and carers and universities in the face of the Government's withdrawal of financial commitment is most important to highlight. One outcome of focus group discussion that demonstrates the beneficial impact of the research was to co-write a chapter with two participants with lived experiences as a disabled woman and a male carer. Drawing from their experiences of co-creating placements and research opportunities with social work students and my own experience of introducing Mend the Gap in the North of England, together we presented a case for 'radical co-production replacing worn out structures in social work' (Casey et al in McLaughlin et al, 2021,p.206).

Themes from Mend the Gap data analysis demonstrates how participants in 'Mend the Gap' projects experienced co -produced learning , knowledge and co-impact of their involvement which promoted a depth of learning and sustainable outcomes. Strong messages were conveyed about the benefits of mutual learning and outcome focussed participatory engagement. This demonstrates that Mend the Gap participants gained an understanding of co-production at the transformative level (Needham and Carr, 2013), which was an aim identified in chapter three. Another outcome of Mend the Gap learning that demonstrates the beneficial impact of the research was to co-write a chapter with parents and a social worker. Together we presented a case for 'why asylum seeker parents are scared of social workers – mending the gaps between us' (Abdallah et al, in McLaughlin et al, 2021, p.94).

To summarise the findings on co-production, a provocative suggestion is shared from one focus group participant, to replace 'professionalism' as the first capability within the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) (PCR, BASW) with 'co-production'. This is perhaps a proposal that can be picked up by BASW (British Association of Social Workers) next time they review the PCF, last 'refreshed' in 2018.

A strong message from the findings that underpins the case for promoting more equal learning was the way in which people talked about their experiences of social workers, discussed next.

4. Professional Values.

It was agreed that professional values are central to the experiences people have of social workers although not everyone knows what these are. Many people with experiences of using services have experienced discrimination, felt judged and stigmatised by those who are meant to be supporting them. By mending this information gap and sharing the values upon which social worker's training is based as defined in chapter one (BASW, 2014) people have more knowledge of their own rights. The three core values previously identified, upon which the social work profession is based are:

- Human rights, social justice and professional integrity. (BASW, 2012, p.8).

These were features of discussion to varying degrees across the research. In addition to committing to these core values, the value of learning from experiential knowledge was also recognised as key to becoming a good professional. Participants contributing from lived experience in focus groups reported having better experiences of social workers who had experienced involvement in their education. People shared examples of previously having social workers who didn't listen to them, who introduced themselves in a very 'standoffish' way, even to the extent of entering someone's home, personal space and being rude. People compared these experiences with social workers who have studied since involvement was formally introduced and commented on how this 'new generation of social workers' are much better at listening to the person. The point was also made that social work students are much better at taking the time people need to build a positive relationship. Although a common view was shared about a 'switch' going off when students qualify i.e., when they hit the ground running and become very busy very quickly.

Participants contributing from lived experiences in Mend the Gap projects experienced professional values within their learning which changed their feelings and 'fears' of social work and service provision. 'Information' was commonly identified as a key gap for people which included information about what social workers are meant to do. Parent participants relied on information informally shared in the community about social workers. By engaging with them in a learning environment, information was shared about the professional values social workers 'must' adhere to, but more importantly they experienced this directly through building trust and positive relationships. This depth of learning together enabled parents to feel the values first-hand that social workers are expected to integrate in the

role. At the same time, social work students were demonstrably putting professional values into practice whilst learning from people's experiences.

I argue that my research demonstrates how learning about professional values together, informed by experiential knowledge, promotes a depth of learning and understanding that is necessary for social work roles. This builds on the work of other researchers who have sought to explore ways for students to acquire the necessary understanding of professional values in preparation for practice (see for example, Thompson, 2006, Akhtar, 2012, Banks, 2016, Adams et al, 2017). Mend the Gap participants exchanged knowledge of cultural values which students and practitioners stated was a significantly different learning experience than lecture/textbook teaching and learning methods.

The mutual exchange that Mend the Gap participants experienced enabled rich discussion about how understanding different cultural values shaped the way professionals would approach an intervention. An added factor highlighted by my research is that many participants contributing from their lived experiences reflected upon how some of their personal values had changed during the process; for example, no longer holding discriminatory views against LGBTQ. In my view this approach takes the exploration of values to a qualitatively different level. It gets to the core of Freire's view that ' the oppressed become oppressors' which is a state of dehumanisation that people need to get beyond in order to become 'humanised' and ' liberated'. (Freire, 1993, p.26).

Freire emphasised 'dialogue' as central to education, encouraging confrontation between people as a total reaction against the 'banking education' concept whereby students are treated as empty containers to be filled by educators (ibid, p.52). My research has demonstrated how 'Mend the Gap' is an approach that offers tools for achieving dialogue, by promoting mutual understanding, knowledge exchange, confrontation which leads to change and liberation. I suggest this approach makes a significant addition to the existing research and literature. I have sought to add to the varied ways of exploring value by presenting a Mend the Gap as an innovative participatory method for engaging with ethical challenges. The focus on the tension in values, between what is internal and what can be learned, has long occupied me. It is not a question with an easy answer, it is a question that provokes debate. After years of contemplation and trying various ways to grapple with it, I have discovered through my research that building relationships and trust means that

people can have honest conversations and be open to changing long held beliefs. This is a far more significant outcome than I ever encountered in a solely classroom-based discussion. The importance of trust and relationships, as a strong theme from research warrants further consideration.

5. Supportive environments.

The subject of how to build trust and establish positive relationships between service users/carers and social workers is underpinned by extensive research and literature which has been summarised by Peter Beresford (2012) as pointing towards four key qualities (identified in Chapter two). These are based on the relationship, social perspective, emotional support and listening as the starting point for co-production, the skills needed to develop these qualities are integral to social work education. Building trust and relationships within supportive environments are key to achieving this. One focus group participant described waiting outside a room to meet a service user for the first time as 'unnatural' and 'horrific' (FG5). When a classroom was so small that students had to sit on the floor, it would clearly not be an accessible environment to people invited to contribute from their experiences. Disabled access is more than a practicality of the physical environment, it is part of a value base that is based on a social perspective of overcoming barriers to include everyone. As one participant made the point clearly, it is about 'getting the basics right'(FG1).

This is less about the practical challenge of finding suitable classrooms that many academics will be familiar with and more about creating a supportive environment from the outset. The research findings identify that getting the basics right includes disabled access, ease of arrangements with reception for people to get in, equal access to university facilities and receiving appropriate and timely payment. Payment systems are a particular issue for Scotland where previously stated funding has been removed. This has recently been highlighted as one of three challenges for the sustainable future of involvement in social work education. The other two challenges point to more collaborative learning between

students and service users and carers and ensuring the latter groups are valued as citizens with agency (Levy et al in McLaughlin et al, 2021, p.380).

Payment rates as well as payment systems are highly controversial sources of friction in social work education. (SCIE 2004). My research highlights how this has not moved beyond controversy and friction. There are many reasons why payment does not work ranging from; payment rates, payment options, support costs, limitations of being in receipt of benefits and inflexible university systems. (SCIE 2004). Thankfully, work undertaken by SCIE and others (Care Quality Commission (CQC), Skills for Care (SFC), General Social Care Council (GSCC), and Office for Disability Issues (ODI), Carers UK ,Shaping Our Lives (SOL), DWP) led to changes to payments for service users through legislation in 2009. This was further updated in 2015 to include carers and expand activities to include research, education, and charities. (SCIE, 2021). Whilst this is good progress, payment rates continue to be a contested issue not least with wide variation between universities in terms of rates and activities.(SCIE, ibid, Beresford, 2014).

I have picked up some concern expressed by academics that the involvement budget would not cover costs for co-production projects. My first response to this, is that a revision of how involvement activities are planned in line with the recommendations of this thesis could lead to different priorities for spending the budget. Secondly, where courses have minimal activities and therefore sufficient funds, the recommendations of this thesis will hopefully present a useful model for utilising the budget. Part of the paradigm shift for taking the recommendations of this thesis forwards involves academic institutions relinquishing control of budgets to enable service user organisations to take the lead. What worked well during the research was that each service user organisation received a budget to manage funds for participants which could include cash where necessary for example to cover costs of taxi or public transport. In an increasingly cashless society, I would argue that at some point during involvement activities someone needs to hold a purse to give cash where needed.

Social work has been viewed as a 'pioneer for cultural change' (Beresford, ibid) with dedicated funding commitment to maintain involvement in education. However, the block

grant has remained unchanged since it was introduced. To develop the co-production initiatives that people want, to align education with the direction of practice it is timely for the Government to review funding. Increased funding to raise standards of learning opportunities founded on experiential knowledge, is a preventative strategy promoting relational power between practitioners and those requiring support.

Questions have been raised in the literature about how to best to support involvement which I feel my research builds upon. The Mend the Gap approach enabled participants to co-create a supportive environment in which everyone can share their lived experiences to the extent they are comfortable. This can vary enormously between individuals and projects. For example, young asylum seekers did not wish to tell their traumatic personal stories to people they did not know. This meant at the first meeting with social work students they talked about their country of origin, special events, hobbies, and interests which was a key part of their identity. Especially important when their identity such as age is challenged. Social work students and social workers shared a wide range of experiences which included people saying they had shared something for the first time that felt very important. The project evaluations demonstrate how the trust and relationships that were most valued within the projects created a supportive environment. Focus group participants who spoke of their own support networks did not engage in mutual experiential learning with students, practitioners and academics, hence this was not an identified theme within the reflexive thematic analysis .However, the desire to build trust and relationships through co-produced learning was a key theme. Also, many focus group participants talked about the importance of group support with academics in involvement facilitator roles.

A collaborative framework is essential in my view for creating a safe space and supportive environment that comes from developing trust and relationships. In drawing together the significance of learning from experiential knowledge, inclusive of all who have experienced structural oppression, discrimination, disadvantage and professional support, I feel that my research question extends to the most difficult contexts for social work intervention.

In considering what difference the involvement of people contributing from lived experiences makes in social work education, by implication this follows through to practice. Beyond the difficult contexts in which my research was undertaken, with many participants who felt excluded and stigmatised by society. It is important to distinguish these contexts from the research participants, for the purpose of extending the application of the research findings to the most difficult social work contexts, adding new insight to the existing research base. Beyond this I shall discuss insight gained from methodology and theory that underpinned the study and my own reflexive learning.

5.5 Implications for practice.

There is an inherent tension in the interconnection between education, policy, and social work practice. The theme of power has been integral throughout this thesis. Smith's (2010) helpful framework has provided a most useful basis for identifying different types of power. His warning calling for a different approach to utilising power to halt the reoccurrence of crises is pertinent in understanding why co-producing knowledge and power in education is key to informing practice.

The motivation to involve people with lived experiences in social work education was a development of policy informing practice to involve people in decisions that affected their lives. It was a recognition that for practitioners to develop skills necessary to promote 'relational power,' this needed to include engaging with service users and carers from the outset. My research found that most activity and collaboration take place in the first year of education, with one of the most common activities for involvement being communication skills assessments. Students must pass this to demonstrate they can go into a practice situation. Whilst the principles behind this seem clear and positive, on its own and, without much other engagement or a clear focus on outcomes, the notion that developing social workers skills with relational power seems limited. Some participants of focus groups commented on the 'artificial' nature of the activity; that it felt 'unnatural' to be put in a context of being assessed on interviewing a service user. It could be argued that the opportunity to develop skills to promote 'relational' power come through placement experiences. Placement evaluations incorporate feedback from service users 'where

possible'. Once again this means that opportunities to promote relational power are limited to contexts where it is easier for service users and carers to provide feedback. If engagement is avoided in difficult circumstances as Smith describes, social workers will rely on their 'positional power' underpinned by authoritative sources of knowledge, to legitimise decisions taken rather than 'relational power' whereby meaningful collaboration and engagement with service users can take place (Smith, 2010).

As an extension of how this power dynamic is promoted, engagement with service users and carers is largely mirrored by university activities which have tended to preclude those most marginalised or 'seldom heard' (Robson et al, 2008). Activities tend to be 'one off' determined and led by an academic agenda. This seems to be the culture unchanged since 2003.

The key difference from my research with Mend the Gap participants is that outside of a university context they identify the gaps they experience with professionals and take forward an agenda that comes directly from their experiences. This changes the power dynamics from the outset. Coming back to Smith's statement, I would extend his point to propose that the starting point is for social work education to take a different approach to power. By putting those contributing from their lived experiences in a lead role to develop learning activities, from the start students will experience relational power through working collaboratively.

The original aim for service users and carers to be involved; 'at all levels of social work education' has not been realised. My research has added to knowledge in this field as reviewed in the literature and has clearly demonstrated that most involvement takes place in the first year with very little or none in subsequent years. The aim to 'empower' people to utilise their experiences within educational processes seems to have been contradicted by a dominant academic agenda. Even where the lead academic encourages service users and carers to introduce their own ideas, this approach to engagement is limited by structures that maintain power with those in professional roles.   Meaningful involvement of service users and carers involves changing structural hierarchies which puts service users and carers in control of the knowledge that comes from their experiences that they want students to learn. As noted by Beresford and Duffy:

"Involvement is not some kind of academic exercise. It is about real change for the better in real people's lives, in the real world." (Beresford and Duffy, in McLaughlin et al,2021, p.5).

Social work involves multi- faceted and highly complex decisions , where different sources of power underpin interventions. The Mend the Gap approach is offered not as a panacea for all problems in social work, rather as a new addition to the family of participatory approaches that Reason and Bradbury (2001) defined. Locating power with the most powerless changes the dialogue. Participants of the very first mend the very first Mend the Gap project noted this as a significant shift, making all the difference to their involvement on more equal terms rather than joining something that professionals had set the agenda for (Beresford et al, in Chiapparini 2016). Research participants in evaluative film recordings referred to; 'putting the humanness' back into social work. As Freire argued.

"If the structure does not permit dialogue, the structure must be changed" (Freire, 1970 p.93).

This quote raises implications for inter-professional contexts. The transferability of the learning into other professions was a stated aim in chapter one

5.6. Implications for inter-professional learning.

The contrasting quotes at the beginning of this chapter demonstrate the shared aims of professional practice. People with experience of using services often have multi-professional involvement within a wide range of human services. Many research participants shared such experiences and shared some experiences of involvement in different professional education courses. With the focus of this thesis on outcomes of involvement, it is notable that ; the main outcomes for asylum seeker parents involved housing services, the main outcome of the project with disabled adults involved the DWP and police, and the main outcomes of mending gaps with unaccompanied asylum seekers whilst focussing on social workers also involved improved training with foster carers.

Prior to conducting this research, Mend the Gap projects included some students from other disciplines, including occupational therapy students, criminology, sociology, and

psychology. Feedback from a sociology student talked about the importance of this approach.

'… *my experience with this program so far has taught me the importance of learning outside the classroom, from discussing real lived experience – a far too easy to overlook component of a well-rounded university education'*. (Casey, p353 in Beresford and Carr, 2018).

Social workers and other professionals do not work in silos, multi -disciplinary working began in the 1980's with the establishment of Community Mental Health Teams (CMHT) and Youth Offending Teams (YOT) (Drinkwater, 2008). As inter disciplinary working has developed so has inter-professional education.

It is beyond the remit of this thesis to expand upon research in this wider context. The point I wish to make is that Mend the Gap as an approach could be applicable in any human services contexts. The research findings demonstrate the effectiveness of an approach that generates outcomes, transformation, and change. Having explored Smith's (2010, ibid) quote in the context of safeguarding, it is equally important to explore Towl and Walkers (2016, ibid) in the context of prisons. My own experience as an 'Inside Out' tutor introduced in chapter one, gave me the privilege of meeting 'inside' students who often commented on the 'human' approach of the shared learning with criminology students. Whilst the aims and objectives of this approach were very clearly met and I cannot praise the course and its tutors highly enough with this, what stood out to me were the most obvious gaps as barriers between those imprisoned and those supporting them. The benefits of taking the Inside Out approach into prison have been described by prison Governors as having a 'wider impact on prison culture'…" *permeating out on to the wings, in to the prisoner-staff working groups, and across the prison, from potential future Inside students to the staff who see and hear us come in to their workplace every week*." (King, Measham and O 'Brien 2019, p.74).

I would be most interested to explore how this positive cultural shift could be built upon by engaging prison staff as well as students within an outcome focussed Mend the Gap project. Further dimensions of the study are discussed next in relation to my own reflective praxis.

5.7 Reflexive Researcher.

The principles of reflexive research have been addressed earlier. In seeking to understand other people's experiences, my own self -awareness was enhanced through reflection on my own experiences and how this level of reflexivity connects with the research findings. In chapter one I shared something of my own lived experiences which I should point out was not the first time I have explored my experiences within an academic context. My experience of being on a mental health ward for eight months suffering eating disorders was a regular discussion point during weekly sessions on bean bags with other counselling students. Sharing our experiential knowledge was crucial to understanding our journey towards become qualified counsellors, in addition to having regular counselling ourselves. As described by Peter Beresford (2007), I chose to remain private about my experience as a social worker, although as Fook guides (2002), I was very conscious of drawing from my own experiences in practice contexts. For example, when working in a learning disability institution I developed an advocacy service to support residents with their rehabilitation from hospital to the community. Occasionally I observed advocates championing individual's rights and confronting hospital managers without first checking with the individual that they wanted them to speak out on their behalf. I recall some of my own family members doing that on my behalf when I was in hospital and I used to wish they wouldn't, because I was the one left there with the atmosphere when they went home. I was quietly working on gaining 'privileges' to be allowed out on a weekend and worried that if they said the wrong thing that could blow my privilege for that week. Of course, it fills me with sadness to look back at how institutionalised I had become (brought to a crisis when my bed was moved when out on a weekend pass), but without that experience, I think I may have been like the advocates championing people's rights without checking I was truly promoting their voice. To me this is a key issue when considering whose voice is being promoted in educational and professional contexts.

When I moved from practice into education as a lecturer, I greatly admired a colleague who spoke openly with students about his experiences of mental ill health. Students fed back how much they valued his openness too. I began to realise at that point that the difference between being open and private about experiences of mental health meant being identified either as a lecturer with an understanding of service users' experiences, or as a lecturer

who was purely an academic and could not have the same level of understanding. This brings to mind Charles' Cooley's 'looking glass' theory,

"*I am not who you think I am; I am not who I think I am; I am who I think you think I am*" (Schubert, 2006).

That has generated considerable academic attention since it was introduced in 1902, not least because of its 'one way internalisation of the perception of others' (Reitzes, 1980). As a reflexive practitioner I chose to use my experience without talking about it. Does this mean I am colluding with a system that maintains the divide between professionals and service users and carers? This is a divide, covered in chapter two, that many have crossed. Joanna Fox, an academic who was open about her own mental distress, believed that,

'*It is through the process of reflection that the service user educator is able to synthesise experience and training*' (Fox, 2011, pp. 170-171).

I made my own position clear as a requirement of approaching the research role, by stating my values and philosophy underpinning participatory methodology. My experiential knowledge was integral to this. Being self-aware has been essential to the research dynamics , both with my interaction with participants, especially considering ethical issues and power inherent in the relationship between researcher and researched (chapter three). Also, demonstrating rigour with my decisions and interpretation of the data by incorporating Reflexive TA (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019 in chapter 4). By using reflexivity in the representation of research, 'reflexive knowledge' is promoted (Hertz, 1997 in Etherington, 2006). By seeking knowledge of the subject from participants' perspectives I was also demonstrating how the knowledge was acquired. The role of reflexivity was crucial in the data analysis interpretation of research findings to ensure credibility and rigour. In my view, the pinnacle of my research is the demonstration of how experiential knowledge can be transformative. Through my interaction with research participants, I have reflected on my own position. Perhaps by keeping my own lived experience quiet, behind the scenes as it were, I have sustained the structure upholding the divisions that this thesis is highlighting are out of date and in need of restructure. From this research, like dots joining up, a clear

picture is emerging that the future of social work education should be underpinned by experiential knowledge inclusive of all participants who wish to contribute their lived experiences as defined earlier. I align with Peter Beresford's (ibid) view that the emphasis should always be placed upon choice. However, by co-creating mutual learning spaces, I feel that people could make different choices. Using my personal experience is about using my reflexivity as a qualitative researcher, as Braun and Clarke describe.

"Qualitative researchers are always thinking, reflecting, learning, and evolving – we do not reach a point where we have nothing more to learn. We are journeying, not arriving! "(2019, p.4)

Undertaking this research over the past five years has been a personal as well as professional journey. My reflective log is peppered with drawings a well as notes, depicting the emotions I experienced. The study allowed me to engage personally with the emotional experiences shared by young people, parents, disabled adults, students and social workers. It has refreshed my role as social work educator and strengthened my resolve to contribute to shaping the future direction of social work education in collaboration with others, as an educator and researcher.

5.8 Reflections on the study design and limitations.

A major strength of this study is that it effectively conveys the diversity of voices and experiences from over a hundred participants. Predominant are those who often feel most marginalised in educational and research contexts. Triangulating the data strengthened the validity of the research demonstrating that the methodological design was a good fit with my capability as a researcher. The outcomes from the Mend the Gap projects have been clearly defined as evidence of change to improve practice. The outcomes of focus group research have presented evidence of wanting such change. All findings underpin the validity of the research question and propose Mend the Gap as a model for taking involvement forward to promote change. What this also demonstrates is how participatory methodology can achieve the overarching global aims for social work, as defined by the IFSW (International Federation of Social Work, 2014). The emphasis this placed on collective

action, the global importance of the profession and re introducing 'social' in social work (Orenellas et al, 2018) has sparked critical discourse on how:

'*New global challenges in human conditions propel us into a search for new global responses.*' (Jones and Truell, 2012, p. 455 in Orenellas, ibid).

I feel that my research adds to this endeavour, by presenting an approach which is based on human rights, promoting collective action and responsibility to promote social justice within a global context that addresses wide ranging structures of oppression. In this sense I suggest that 'strategies... that transcend the micro-macro divide ... aimed at sustainable development' (IFSW ibid) need to be driven by appropriate methodology.

Integral to epistemological and methodological rigor, the study has been permeated throughout by theory that primarily seeks to strengthen the validity of knowledge that comes from people's experiences. Critical theories and social construction theories disrupted dominant discourse on the values and principles of involvement by exposing the assumptions and power relations this is based upon. Together these theories challenge the status quo by offering alternatives based on taking action to understand what involvement in professional education could look like. This new understanding is the basis for developing a new form of radical co-production which became the focus of one of the chapters co-written with research participants, addressed in chapter four as a key beneficial outcome of the research. The Mend the Gap approach featured strongly in the chapter alongside a co-production model for social work placements (Casey et al in McLaughlin et al, 2021,)

What could have strengthened the study design would have been to have considered applying Reflexive TA to the TPE findings from each Mend the Gap project, which I later decided was the best way of cohering the triangulated data. As a second researcher was engaged with coding and identifying themes with focus group data, it would have been consistent to have engaged a second researcher with TPE data. My learning from this is to anticipate more clearly at the outset the analysis methods for triangulated data.

One other consideration I would make to future research, is to incorporate more creative means within the research process. Though dialogue was critical to the PAR approach, there were moments when I was struck by having four to five interpreters in the room which made me think of other ways that participants could have expressed their experiences.

Making the films was a most positive outcome, those who did not wish to speak on camera could be behind it. Young people in particular enjoyed learning film making skills. I can see there is more scope for creative skills development within the research process.

Reflecting upon both sets of findings from the previous chapter revealed some tensions which I consider relates to the different aims of both methods. The focus groups were single events which limited the potential for a participatory approach. Although the main research question was widely accepted as '*the*' question everyone wanted to address, the framework for addressing this was researcher led. This meant for example, that I had overlooked putting my information into an easy read format. This is an error I aim to rectify beyond my thesis, with publishing an article based on my research findings in an accessible format. In contrast, the participatory ethos of the Mend the Gap approach revealed potential tensions between participants who wanted to take more responsibility than others. Whilst it was important to recognise that a participatory approach needed to be flexible and understanding, that this could mean different things to different people and that the same commitment from all was an unrealistic expectation, it had to be balanced by ensuring that everyone had the equality of opportunity. I was aware that some participants were more confident in the beginning with expressing their interest to take on facilitator roles within the group. Perhaps as other participant's confidence grew, I could have revisited this during the research to enable them to take up more facilitation and responsibility. An issue previously acknowledged in the methodology chapter, was around maintaining anonymity when participants expressed wanting to have their names included in the published thesis. Bagnoli and Clark (2010) have captured well this tension:

"*In such situations researchers may have to go against the decisions of participants in order to preserve the ethical integrity of the research while ironically going against the philosophy of a participatory approach*" (p.2015)

Reflecting upon these factors has enabled me to think how to extend a participatory approach further in research design in the future, from conception and at regular intervals throughout.

A concluding observation which defines the effectiveness of action research is that paradigms have been transcended since starting this study. The paradigm at the outset

placed focus on 'service users' and carers. As the research has developed to overcome binary categories, a more inclusive definition of all who can potentially contribute to social work education has emerged. The new paradigm would re frame the research question to explore; *what difference does the involvement of those contributing from their lived experiences in social work education make*?

5.9 Contribution to knowledge.

The distinctive contribution of my research is that it brings new insight and introduces a new approach to participatory learning within social work education. Specifically, the Mend the Gap approach is offered as a model that all social work courses could include. The research question initially driven by those contributing from their lived experiences to social work education was consolidated in recognition of the gaps identified by the literature review. This study adds to the current knowledge in this field and extends current understandings by demonstrating how involvement can lead to a wide range of transformative outcomes. The value of the methodology was strengthened by adding a new approach to the established family of participatory methods, by applying Mend the Gap for the first time to participatory action research. The analysis of findings revealed that the mutual benefits of exchanging knowledge and experiences promotes positive outcomes and leaves legacies for sustaining the most marginalised communities. The impact of the research was most profound within the Mend the Gap projects when participants reflected upon how their own views aligned with levels of oppression they experienced and wanted to change. Participants transcended boundaries that maintained unequal relationships building trust and support.

Arguably the biggest gaps that participatory research seeks to mend are with policy makers (Beresford, 2006, 2017, 2019, 2021).Through collective action and collective voice, policy makers took note. The Home Office changed its housing policy and now consults with asylum seekers when reviewing policy and guidance and the DWP are now engaged in co-produced learning with disabled adults.

The study also makes an original contribution to the international field of knowledge as the first research study in the UK (second to Sweden where the approach originated, Heule, et

al in McLaughlin et al, 2021) to apply the Mend the Gap approach currently adopted by eighteen countries (PowerUs). Finally, the study presents a clear structure for revisioning social work educational structures.

The transferability of findings to other professional contexts adds to the value of the research contribution within the social sciences. The implications for education and research are considered next.

5.10 A particular point in time.

There is a point in every thesis where the relevance the timeliness of the research is highlighted. Little did I know how significant this point would become for my research coming to fruition during a pandemic crisis. Concerns are beginning to be raised that people have been excluded from involvement activities considered too time consuming in a context of rapid decision making (Beresford 2021, Duffy et al, forthcoming). This risks unravelling years of progress by assuming that service users and carers are not as capable as professionals of working under pressure. A new publication exploring service users and carers' experiences of Covid 19 highlights how experiential knowledge could have benefitted many contexts which were not sought (Williams et al, 2021). Social work students graduating in 2021 will have undergone two years of disrupted studies, which may have reduced usual levels of service user and carer involvement in their education. This increases the need for involvement at post qualifying levels which had already been established as inadequate (Robinson and Webber 2011, Meakin and Matthews, 2015). I contend that by incorporating 'Mend the Gap' in undergraduate , post graduate curriculums and post qualifying training/CPD, the enhanced distance that the current crisis has created may be reduced and the vision for social work realised. The pandemic has placed a spotlight on a greater need for a paradigm shift in social work which the research findings identify a timely solution for. This study has opened new thinking to inform how to refresh structures at a point where rejuvenation is much needed.

It is beyond the scope of this research as I seek to bring it to conclusion, to ruminate on this post pandemic subject. However, it is an opportunity to pause at this point in time. Not least because of the huge and devastating impact it has had on many people's lives, leading to increased inequality of those living in poverty. Extra efforts will be necessary to ensure

people's voices are central to processes in the future. Looking ahead involves prioritising experiential knowledge in research, policy, education, and practice to sustain the great progress that has been made and not unravel it.

5.11 Recommendations for Social Work Education.

The specific recommendations that arise from the study that inform social work education to include the regulator, universities and academics with lead roles on involvement are:

(i)   Outcome focussed involvement

Involvement activities should be outcome focussed which needs to be built in from the outset of planning involvement. The effectiveness of involvement needs to be regularly reviewed, ensuring that all participants share ownership of the outcomes for development. This applies to all levels of social work education and professional development. Future research could develop from a growing evidence based upon the difference involvement makes in education and practice.

High quality research is essential to developing new knowledge, best practice and policies in social work. These are opportunities for advancing emancipatory research by putting those contributing from their lived experiences at the heart of education, research, policy and practice. Further, participatory education and research approaches could enable social work students and practitioners to become engaged in knowledge contribution. The vision for promoting research mindedness in training professionals could be supported within education by developing skills and proficiency that are underpinned by experiential knowledge.

(ii)   Mend the Gap

Mend the Gap could be introduced on all social work courses , open to all students, newly qualified and experienced social workers. Links could be made with service user led and community-based organisations to identify people who most excluded from educational and

practice contexts to lead on the agenda from their experiential knowledge. This could form a clear strategy for ensuring co-production is on the social work curriculum, supported by the regulator. Where other models of co-production are developed, this should be on the basis that a definition of co-production needs to be clearly agreed as one that reflects a more radical approach to changing power relations and promoting transformative outcomes.

(iii)   Leadership from lived experience

User led organisations are best placed to lead on involvement activities. All universities delivering social work education should adopt such an approach to involvement, replacing an academic led agenda. This involves relinquishing control over budgets and enabling more flexible payment systems. Further ensuring that training, preparation and support requirements are met.

Terminology around lived experience should be applied to anyone who has experienced structural oppression, discrimination, and disadvantage.

(iv)   Curriculum review

The social work curriculum should be reviewed and rejuvenated to include topics that equip students to engage in diverse communities. For example, introducing studies on international political conflict would prepare students much better for meeting with newly arrived migrants who are experiencing displacement and trauma. Ensuring that social workers are knowledgeable of human rights is key to promoting equality and challenging contexts where people's rights are undermined. Topics needs to be thoroughly covered in course content to ensure clarity of people's rights in a wide range of contexts. For example, understanding why the social model is essential to supporting disability rights and provides a helpful framework for understanding mental health . The knowledge base of social work needs to extend its development through inclusion of experiential based knowledge. Mend the Gap is a suggested model for inclusion on the curriculum. Co-production should be practiced not preached.

(v)   Real funding

Meaningful involvement requires meaningful funding. All involvement activities should be appropriately remunerated in accordance with individual circumstances. A UK wide Government review should be undertaken with urgent reinstatement of funding in Scotland and consideration to increasing funding that has been static for too long. A more level playing field should be established to ensure parity between institutions for payments. Audits of budget spends should be more rigorous to evidence how involvement budgets are being spent. University payment systems need to increase flexibility of payment arrangements. Service user led organisations are well placed to manage university involvement budgets.

5.12 Recommendations for Human Service Professional Education and Higher Education.

- Mend the Gap could be incorporated in a wide range of professional programmes that wish to achieve greater diversity and integration through challenging traditional foundations of professional education.

- The involvement of people with lived experiences of using services should be outcome focussed to ensure that transformative outcomes are achieved, course structures need to build in evaluation methods to ascertain what difference involvement makes in education and practice.

- All Higher Education institutions could review the curriculum to include experiential knowledge-based learning and activities to remove barriers (perceived and actual) between university students and the local community.

5.13 New directions for social work education and future research

Undertaking and discussing the research provides new insight into how the future of social work could look. The language of involvement and inclusion often includes discussion of barriers to overcome. This research has addressed many barriers from people's experiences and identified some more that lie ahead. Some thoughts for seeing things differently are for educators to adopt a '50/50 vision' of those contributing from lived experiences. For example, the 'academic' conference circuit is dominated by those funded by their institutions to attend. It seems that every academic is required to justify the funding required to attend a conference by presenting a paper. In my experience this makes conferences very hard to navigate. Many conferences aim to include service users which for whom lack of funding is a barrier; the future conference circuit could identify a free place for a service user along with each paying academic. This would effectively mean each institution would be paying for two people, increasing opportunities for knowledge exchange that is an established Government aim to 'further a culture of continuous improvement in universities' (UKRI, gov.uk, 2021).(Win win).

Future research should focus on the outcomes of involvement beyond the values and principles. Evidence of change should be the key focus of future research in this field. The widened definition of those contributing from their lived experiences is inclusive of all involved in social work.

Coming to the end of writing this thesis, I am conscious that the audience for this will not include many people with lived experiences who have inspired this study. I hope to write an article based on the research findings which I consider would be better practice to produce in an accessible format. I learned from 'Skills for People' that I could have involved them with producing easy read versions of my research materials which I should have done. I hope to identify some funding to produce an article based on these research findings that is accessible to all.

As we enter a post pandemic period, there will inevitably be a wider review of how higher education courses will be delivered. This provides an opportunity to think about how a wide range of courses can benefit from mending gaps with people in the community.

We could co-create learning spaces where the lines between people in their roles are less defined. If we approach things together, as educators from our different experiences we start from a shared vision. At a point in time where globally the message to 'socially distance' has been so deeply engrained, I believe we need to make some very big changes to become socially connected again. Some concluding comments from research participants underpin these thoughts.

'Who are you aligning yourself with, the oppressed? Or the oppressors? Who are the oppressors? At the moment the oppressors are the same people of the state and you are working in the state. So as far as I'm concerned you become an oppressor …. If we are not prepared to have that conversation at university, then where are we going to have that conversation?' (FG1)

'When I stand up in front of the class all of those students are individuals, they all have life experiences and here's this man standing talking to them and it hits a cord .Of course it's going to be a shock to them, of course they are not going to be able to handle it at that minute, but then there's a realisation maybe the next day…..that they're not alone.' (FG3)

'Mend the gap is the most effective way to connect with people in the poorest communities. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people are very vulnerable if they are not integrated in the community. More policy makers need to get on board with this way of working'. (Mend the Gap, one)

5.14 My concluding comments

The findings from the study contribute to the knowledge and understanding of how a wide range of participants experience involvement. The study was driven by a concern that the impact of involvement on social work practice was under- researched. This thesis achieved the aims set out by adding to the existing research, literature and debate about the

importance of the outcomes of involvement. It also offers the Mend the Gap model for others to take forward. The research findings reveal new insight which I contend should inform a much-needed paradigm shift in social work education. I am humbled by how much people living in the margins of communities give to improve services, if not for themselves for others. It is hoped this study is the start of an ongoing dialogue to inform re-visioning social work on a more equal basis.

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Service User and Carer involvement in social work education;

What Difference Does It Make?

Researcher: Helen Casey

Invitation to participate in a Mend the Gap/participatory research project.

I am a part time PhD student at Durham University and would like to invite people with lived experiences, students and qualified social workers to take part in the research I am currently undertaking.

I am a registered social worker, teacher and counsellor and currently work as a social work educator.

Some background information:

In May 2002 when the social work degree was introduced, the Department of Education made a formal commitment to the involvement of service users and carers social work education. Fifteen years on my interest in this subject is to explore the impact of this.

Below is some information which may address some of the questions you may have as a research participant:

What is participatory research?

Participatory research is a partnership approach based on participants agreeing to sharing responsibilities and power. The aim of this approach is to co-produce new knowledge and ideas which everyone shares ownership of.

The participatory research approach applied to this project is referred to as; 'Mend the Gap'.

The 'gap mending' approach was developed by 'PowerUs, the Social Work learning partnership'(www.powerus.se) to promote new ways of learning that can come from sharing experiences, knowledge and skills within professional education. People with experiences of professional involvement in their lives can give unique perspectives for students and practitioners to learn from. Professionals and students may also have their own experiences of receiving

support from services. By creating a positive environment people can learn together to influence professional education and develop respectful relationships to improve practice and outcomes.

Why am I being asked to take part?

You are being asked to take part because you are currently studying or have previously studied as a social worker, or because of your experiences of social work support.

What will happen if I agree to take part?

You are being invited to take part in one of three Mend the Gap projects, located in the North East. The precise location will be decided by each group.

The programme will run for 6-8 weeks with each session lasting approximately 3 hours. The aim is to co-produce outcomes which can improve social work education and practice in accordance with people's rights and needs. By coming together, participants will identify the gaps that exist between them, for example, knowledge, skills, cultural understanding. Each session will focus on different topics identified as 'gaps' between people. Through dialogue, ideas will be shared to 'mend the gaps', involving those who can assist with this process.

What will I get out of taking part?

It is appreciated that many people have busy lives and taking time out to commit to attending a weekly project needs to be a worthwhile activity. An aim of the Mend the gap approach is to identify outcomes which means that positive ideas are developed and supported to make changes and improvements to professional practice and services. You will be a key participant in this process.

Are there any risks involved with taking part?

There could be some risks involved with taking part in a Mend the Gap project, based around the potentially sensitive nature of some of the experience's participants may wish to share. Support is available for participants throughout the projects and procedures for confidentiality and safeguarding will be fully explained.

If you have any concerns about any aspect of taking part in the research you can contact me, there will always be an opportunity to speak with me before

each session begins as well as afterwards. You can leave the project at any time and your views will not be used in the research. You can also ask for your information to be removed from the research up to one month after the project ends.

Participants' well-being is central to the research process and this will be thoroughly addressed throughout.

If I take part will everyone know what I have said?

As a co-participants, others in the group may hear what you say. It is important that everyone fully understands confidentiality so that any information that you wish to remain confidential is respected by group members and not shared outside of the group. Whilst this cannot be guaranteed, everyone will be asked to agree to share responsibility for this.

You will not be identified in the writing up of the projects, a pseudonym will be used instead. If you wish to be recognised for your contribution to this research your name will be included in the acknowledgements.

The data collected will be used to help answer the research question and will inform the dissertation I will be writing.

If you are happy to take part, please complete and sign the attached form and identify your availability to attend a Mend the Gap project.

With thanks.

Helen Casey.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss this research please contact me directly; helen.m.casey@durham.ac.uk

Alternatively if you have any other questions or concerns about the research please contact the research supervisor, Roger Smith; roger.smith@durham.ac.uk

Exploring the Impact of Service User and Carer Involvement in Social Work Education – participant form.

Name:

Preferred location (University/work):

Best time of day/evening to meet (including weekends):

Contact details:

Any access / support requirements:

Appendix one (b): Invitation to participate in a focus group.

Service User and Carer involvement in social work education;

What Difference Does It Make?

Researcher: Helen Casey

Invitation to participate in a focus group.

I am a part time PhD student at Durham University and would like to invite people with lived experiences, students and qualified social workers to take part in the research I am currently undertaking.

I am a registered social worker, teacher and counsellor and currently work as a social work educator.

Some background information:

In May 2002 when the social work degree was introduced, the Department of Education made a formal commitment to the involvement of service users and carers social work education. Fifteen years on my interest in this subject is to explore the impact of this.

Below is some information which may address some of the questions you may have as a focus group participant:

Why am I being asked to take part?

You are being asked to take part because you are currently studying or have previously studied as a social worker, or because you have contributed to social work education because of your experiences of receiving a service or caring for someone.

What will happen if I agree to take part?

You are being invited to take part in one of (up to) twelve focus groups located in the UK. Participants will be a mixture of social work students, practitioners, service users and carers up to a maximum of 20 people. The intention is for the group to be as inclusive as possible taking a co-participatory approach to exploring the subject. The focus group will take part at the University where

you studied or if more convenient close to where you live or work and will be take up to two hours.

Are there any risks involved with taking part?

It is unlikely that there will be any risks involved with taking part in a focus group but if you have any concerns about any aspect of taking part in the research you will have the opportunity to speak with me about this before the focus group begins. Similarly if you have any concerns after the focus group we can discuss this. You can leave the focus group at any time and your views will not be used in the research. You can also ask for your information to be removed from the research up to 2 weeks after the focus group.

Participants' well-being is central to the research process and information will be provided about support available should this requirement arise resulting from participating in the focus groups.

If I take part will everyone know what I have said?

You will not be identified in the writing up of the focus groups, a pseudonym will be used instead. If you wish to be recognised for your contribution to this research your name will be included in the acknowledgements. All transcriptions will be kept on a password protected device and all data will be destroyed one year after collection.

The data collected will be used to help answer the research question and will inform the dissertation I will be writing.

If you are happy to take part please complete and sign the attached form and identify your availability to attend a focus group.

With thanks.

Helen Casey.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss this research please contact me directly; helen.m.casey@durham.ac.uk

Alternatively if you have any other questions or concerns about the research please contact the research supervisor, Roger Smith; roger.smith@durham.ac.uk

Exploring the Impact of Service User and Carer Involvement in Social Work Education – participant form.

Name:

Preferred location (University/work):

Best time of day/evening to meet (including weekends):

Contact details:

Any access / support requirements:

Appendix two (a): Mend the Gap /PAR consent form (adults)

<table>
<tr><td style="background-color:#c4b8d9">Exploring the effectiveness of service user and carer involvement in social work education.</td><td>Durham University</td></tr>
</table>

Everyone who takes part in this research project is required to give their informed consent. This means that I have a responsibility to make sure that you fully understand what being a participant will involve for you before you agree to do so. Please therefore familiarise yourself with the attached information sheet, and don't hesitate to ask me if you have any questions about the research project and your involvement in it.

I am happy to go through this with you and ensure you understand everything.

	Yes	No
I have read the information sheet and been given the opportunity to ask questions about the research project, with satisfactory responses.		
I agree to take part in a Mend the Gap group with the researcher and other participants.		
I understand that I have the right not to participate in anything I do not feel comfortable with, and that I can leave or take a break from the group at any time.		
I give my permission for the notes from group discussions and other information resources generated, to be used for the purposes of the research.		
I understand that all information will be stored securely and that any identifiable information about myself or others will not be included in the writing up of the thesis.		
I am aware that my name will not be used and that my identity will be kept anonymous in the research project publication, unless I decide want to be included in the acknowledgements.		
I understand that what is discussed in the group will be kept confidential by the researcher, but that if the researcher feels that I or somebody else is at risk of serious harm, they may need to disclose this to relevant agencies.		
I will not discuss the identities of participants or anything they express which they wish to remain confidential, with anyone else after the group is over. I commit to being respectful towards other group members at all times.		
I am aware that the researcher has asked all members of the group to commit to not discussing the identities of other participants or anything they say outside of the group setting, but understand that this cannot be guaranteed.		

I understand that I am free to choose whether or not to take part in this research project, and that I am also free to withdraw from it at any point both during and after the project has been completed.		
I understand that I can keep a copy of this consent form for my records.		

Having read the information sheet and consent form, I confirm that I understand what is required of me for this research project and that I am happy to take part.

Signed: _____ (Participant)

Signed: _____ (Researcher)

Date: ____ / ____ /_____

CONSENT FORM

(AVAILABLE IN ANY LANGUAGE REQUIRED)

(Parent/guardian signature *also* required if the young person is under16)

Please read the Information Sheet first and then read the following very carefully:

I have had the research explained to me and I understand my involvement in it. ☐

I have read the Information Sheet and have been able to discuss it with the interpreter/ researcher/my worker ☐

I understand that my involvement is voluntary. ☐

I understand that being involved will not have any effect on any other areas of my life (i.e. school, home.) ☐

I agree to take part in the research. ☐

Young person's name:

Signature:

Date:

I give my consent for……………………………(insert young person's name) to take part in the Research Project.

Parent/guardians name:

Relationship to Young Person:

Signature:

Date:

Appendix two (c): Focus groups consent form.

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3">Exploring the effectiveness of service user and carer involvement in social work education.</td></tr>
</table>

Everyone who takes part in this research project is required to give their informed consent. This means that I have a responsibility to make sure that you fully understand what being a participant will involve for you before you agree to do so. Please therefore familiarise yourself with the attached information sheet, and don't hesitate to ask me if you have any questions about the research project and your involvement in it.

I am happy to go through this with you and ensure you understand everything.

	Yes	No
I have read the information sheet and been given the opportunity to ask questions about the research project, with satisfactory responses.		
I agree to take part in a focus group with the researcher and other participants.		
I understand that I have the right not to participate in anything I do not feel comfortable with, and that I can leave or take a break from the group at any time.		
I give my permission for the notes from the group discussion to be used for the purposes of the research.		
I understand that all information will be stored securely and that any identifiable information about myself or others will not be included in the transcript. I understand that all data will be securely stored and deleted after one year.		
I am aware that my name will not be used and that my identity will be kept anonymous in the research project publication, unless I decide want to be included in the acknowledgements.		
I understand that what is discussed in the group will be kept confidential by the researcher, but that if the researcher feels that I or somebody else is at risk of serious harm, they may need to disclose this to relevant agencies.		
I will not discuss the identities of participants or anything they express which they wish to remain confidential, with anyone else after the group is over. I commit to being respectful towards other group members at all times.		
I am aware that the researcher has asked all members of the group to commit to not discussing the identities of other participants or anything they say outside of the group setting, but understand that this cannot be guaranteed.		
I understand that I am free to choose whether or not to take part in this research project, and that I am also free to withdraw from it at any point both during and after the project has been completed.		
I understand that I can keep a copy of this consent form for my records.		

Having read the information sheet and consent form, I confirm that I understand what is required of me for this research project and that I am happy to take part.

Signed: _____ (Participant)

Signed: _____ (Researcher)

Date: ____ / ____ /_____

Appendix three: Samples from focus group transcripts.

FG 1.

Initials are pseudonyms for participants, 'RE' is for myself as researcher.

FG1
In what ways have you experienced involvement in social work education?

J. Involved with doing presentations for social work students, and co-production, I find it more interesting to see what they want and to understand my speech.

W. J. does a lot of work around communication skills quite enjoys teaching around making sure they have understood what he wants

J. For example, last week me and R. undertook a class for ...

R. It was a communication skills workshop for BA social work students. We did a role play scenario, where J. was assessed by students in front of their peers. J presented a scenario it's fair to say that students got the wrong end of the stick. J was then able to give them feedback on a number of things, the style of the communication, some of which was good some of which wasn't. Then the content of their understanding of what he was wanting to say which was universally limited.

 J. I feel I can communicate well

R. Yes J feels he can communicate very well, and obviously there is a trick for social work students in those roles for saying how much you do understand how much you don't understand and have a strategy for asking someone to repeat or clarify. We were testing situations for understanding someone better, so we were testing that out and trying to help them with the importance of translating everything.

Re – that sounds important in terms of preparing students before they are in that situation where they might feel be struggling. They are lucky to have that opportunity.

J-I can feel myself communicating well. Sometimes I need the help from W and R with translation.

R- We do a lot of lessons with J. and students get a lot out of interacting with you don't they J? J wouldn't take a whole lesson on his own That's not to say we couldn't design something that you could take on your own J I don't know what you think about that.

J- It would be hard.

W.-We do it half and half.

Re- sounds brilliant, good. Thank you.

S- I have been involved with social work students and I was involved with interviews as well and some forms of co- production teaching as well. We have been talking about the problem we are facing people we have been having difficulties communicating and…

W. you can come back to it if you can't remember

Re- I am going to come up with more questions so we will come back to more of the types of things you have been doing.

B. The types of things I have been involved with is also interviewing candidates who want to come on the social work course - BA and MA . I've also been involved where there are seminars for students as well, some of the seminars might be speaking about some of my experiences of having social workers in my life and what's helped things, what social work is to help us and some other things as well. To get views across, ask questions. Also, I've been involved with assessing students with role plays as well, when they have been out on role play. Usually it's involved a social work practitioner and a service user or carer on the panel, and we assess their role plays and give them feedback. Sometimes we get involved with the 'four-day goal' where they do this different setting as well. We get involved with a seminar where they do these role plays as well, we do a seminar on communication skills, we can see how well we gauge they are communicating with a service user or carer.

Re – sounds good

W-I've been involved for quite a long time with different phases. It's come in peaks and troughs which is quite interesting. The first phase of involvement was purely around interviews and recruitment and selection. And then I went form recruitment and selection I went into co-teaching with people like J. and other academics and then from co-teaching we went on to delivering sessions by ourselves. So, just as a group of service users. I think initially the academics were not sure about whether to leave us there or not or whether to work with us. It was very hands on to start with and then I think as we get to know each other we became a lot more confident in our ability to facilitate a group by ourselves. That was interesting because I think the first few was a bit free flow, we got some pretty bad feedback to start with which you just take on the chin. And it was because we didn't really have any training to prepare for people to be involved.

J – (agreeing) right.

FG 2.
What difference does it make to yourselves being involved in professional's training?

A- I left school I learned more when I left than I did in school

B- In the last ten years, I don't think it's been 15 years, but say10 years, I think me, and A have done a lot. I can see a difference like when we've trained students on their faces. We train them and they leave , they look more relaxed, surprised, happy about how good we are.

C.-F, what benefits do you find from being involved?

F-It's mainly the interviews. I really enjoyed the interviews because I feel they do really listen.

G-I think one of the other things with the interviews, or some of the group have had the opportunity to take a lecture; it's being able to tell the students on a one-to-one basis your lived experience, your story and some of us have done it on film and different things. So, there's an opportunity for people to have an input in whichever way they most feel comfortable. One of the biggest drivers for me to come onto this group was the fact that I did want to make a difference because I knew there was a huge problem a lack of understanding maybe of social workers. That's not a criticism of social workers and their training, it's the fact that if an ordinary person who has been a service user or has been closely involved with the service user can explain to them that they may not realise the balance of power. I used my example, I had been a professional person in my daily life I had lots of contact with social services because I was responsible for a lot of people who had daily contact with social services. As soon as that situation changed and the switch just flipped really because my mum was then the person that was in need of social services involvement and sitting next to her across the table from social workers because I was concerned and taking care of her and her best interest was entirely different than being a part of the system and I was absolutely amazed at how different I felt and how different the approach was and I have spoken to someone help else who was actually director of social services and he had exactly the same thing when his mum had dementia. I said to him you don't have to tell me when you're on the other side of the table of the professionals. I don't think they realise the effect it has, it's a hugely powerful thing.

C – Some of that can be a personal perspective because you're not used to that.

G - You're used to being the one that always makes the decisions . Yes, and then make something out of it.

C - it's disempowering isn't it?

G-It's really important I'm hoping that going forwards I can perhaps work on a one-to-one basis with students as they start on course because I am sure that will go with them, because I think that an individual story can be much more impactful than somebody who

hasn't been in that situation. You know how someone would say 'walk in my shoes 'for a while. I think it's the emotion of it as well .

C - We saw that at the conference when the lady spoke from the refugee camp, the lady from the refugee organisation she gave a brilliant talk, it was fantastic. Had I not seen the lady who had been a refugee I would have still thought she was excellent but that added perspective from her experience really stayed with me...it stayed with me for so long . It will all stay with me.
I think with the service user participation for using the service, for want of a better word it's very complicated. It's complicated to use services in the first place and then to live your adult life in a way that it wasn't the way you planned it to happen to happen and you've got all these emotions and you probably putting your own labels on yourself as well, like not being good enough and all the rest of it. To give something back and to be able to thrive and do something purposeful is really, really good for the self-esteem. And to feel valued and wanted but not in a tokenistic or patronising way.

G-It's to make things better for the people coming behind us. And it is very emotional. I think emotion is powerful when you are training people you can't get anything more powerful than actual raw emotion. And it can be difficult for students to see that raw emotion coming out.... people telling their stories it's very emotional, but they have to understand it's not just a job to these people is it, that they are dealing with, their clients.

C- Do you remember at the conference and we all asked people what they wanted to be called and at the end of the day it all boiled back down to being called who you were like F, A and B, because we're all human beings. If we connect with people at the human being level first and then stop all the value judgements like 'what you need is that....' Just treating each other at that level for everything would be a lot easier and much better. Maybe it's the next level with professionals because it's this three- way thing at interviews , we got working social workers , the academics and then the service users. People with experiences, perhaps we need to find some ways of following up what happens when people are trained... the impact and the impact on the people are dealing with. I might think of myself as an amazing social worker for example, I trained here many years ago, but the reality might not be the same for somebody else.

Re- I think that's a good point because it's what we said before about you would like to know what social workers are thinking out there in the field, what they've got out of the training. Certainly, people I've worked have asked me that question. That's something I'm hoping to try and find out, I wonder if there's a way of universities finding some way of finding that out on an ongoing basis.

C-We could probably do that through the co-production network, they are very keen to publish all this and are very keen to find ways for the justification of all this to keep it going more community orientated trying to avoid all the divisive politics that we see.

T- I'd like to find out myself

Re- I pick up that you are going more down that co productive route, feels like that's where you're going having come quite a long journey with your involvement .I'm just wondering how you came to that approach ?

FG3

Do you think involvement addresses some of the power issues?

G-Yes, especially the personal testimonies, it can be quite daunting, just to get the reaction of , 'oh my God, I hope I am never going to be like that'…'I hope I never go down that road as a social worker'

L- The students never forget that. We go to students' graduations. We see the students we met in our workshops. They still remember us. The still remember what we said.

Re-You go to the student's graduations? That's fantastic.

All-yes

F-Yes, we see them at the beginning, and we see them at the end

Re-That's great

J-At the last workshop I did have a student come up to me and ask for advice, about something we had been talking about, that was great which was good.

B-You see how good we are?

Re-Yes, I am conscious you have been waiting to say something.

M-Yes, I was just going to say that mainly within the group I hope everybody learns stuff something from each other. You don't notice everybody's problems until they've said it and then sometimes you can learn from that. Depend on what they say you it can help you out with your own problem you can think about as they are worse off, they got through it, maybe I should try harder, or, oh well, maybe I can get through that, I can learn something.

Re-So that comes from shared learning.?

M-Yes, that's what feels good about this group. I just think everybody just helps each other.

Y-This group helps

M-yes, sorry, sorry. I was also trying to say noticing how we work, with students, …I hope we give that effect to them. I hope I do when I'm sharing my story, I always answer their questions, so does everyone else. We work well together.

N-even though we are teaching the students they are learning from us because we are telling them our stories, we are all supporting each other like M said, they learn from us .We are also learning from each other's stories.

J- We learn from the students as well, it's not just one way, it's two way.

L-I also think, we are here to help the students but coming to these meetings can help the person a lot. I live alone, I am very isolated, my house is very poor, my diet is very poor so coming to this situation, being able to talk with people and talk to students, that's counts a lot to me personally. what's made all the difference for me

Re- So it's become a very supportive network that has made quite a difference in your life.

N- I think sometimes unless you have experience of working with people like us people sometimes don't understand. It's nice to just come here and say something and be listened to you and they will listen to you. And you are just a person and you can say anything, and they will listen to you. As long as you get your thing, you can use it as venting .No it's not really venting. You're just telling someone something and they're listening to you which is important

J-They don't judge her either

P-No there's no judgement

F- we don't judge *them* either.

N-You can say anything to the students. Like in one of the workshops we did role play, I think it was last week, there was a group of student s that came up to me and I had the scenario in front of me because we had it all typed up and they print it off and give it to them before. I didn't bother reading my scenario, I had forgotten what it was so I started talking about something completely different. They listened to me though. They were interested in what I was saying. Whatever you do, they are still going to learn from it. We all make mistakes

R- I make mistakes too.

J-They only get a couple of sentences, they don't get lots, they just get a very short synopsis, whole story just a couple of sentences and then they come and interview us.

Re-Is this for an assessment?

F-for a role play

J-aye for them to do their skills in questioning people.

Re-So when you say you see them at the beginning and the end, do you see them right through to the end or mainly see them in the first year

B-We see them right the way through.

F-We see them right through and the postgrads as well and other students, you get to see all types from the start to the end

R-We even had first year students when Q was here.

C.-We even had first year students, 28 then they got to see first year students on any course .That went down very well.

Re-So you might be with a mixed student group not just social workers ?

C-No that was the only time,

F-We also do workshops for mental health students as well.

Y-A few years ago they were involved in University wide mental health week

J-That was when we did things for the students, I did colouring books because I like that. Aye we had plasticine, E took people for walks, all things to help them to relax

G-That's right we did singing too.

B-I was the radical one, but they would not let me do it. I wanted a full-blown nervous breakdown in the atrium, just to see how they dealt with it, but they would not let me.

FG4

Is feedback on what you do important?

B. Can I ask one question? When a social worker goes to someone's house, does the social worker have feedback forms? ' cause you could give them that and ask them to send it back to you that could be one of the things, you could do

S. That's a really good idea. So every twelve months we have something called a review , we work out how the last twelve months have been and that's the only time we get that feedback once a year.

C- I would want to be able to generate my own feedback form and then give that to people so I can keep receiving their feedback and building upon on it rather than wait 12 months.

B…If you get really good feedback you know you've done your job quite well.

Re- do you think its' important how you get that?

B- It is yes. I think so. I think the councils need to be looking at their data of the feedback form for people with learning disabilities, they are going into their houses they need that feedback straight away, instead of waiting 12 months.

Re. And it might be organisations like yours that are well placed to give that kind of feedback. Might it be hard to ask for feedback? How do we get honest feedback?

C. What we do in the family advice and support teams when ever we go to initial meetings we usually have an information pack that we can take with them, it might even be a matter of fact that we slip in one of those forms that they can fill in their own time.

Re- You are letting them know that you value that. I am conscious of time just like we started we went around and each said something about our experience, …could we close by going around with everyone saying if there is any one thing / difference that involvement makes…even if it's just one word. Lets go round..

V.I think social work is about making a difference when we go to other people's house. One thing that we need to understand that we are doing the right thing is go there knowing that the profession has power on its own, and we can try and make the person to feel ,so the person can understand with me so the person can understand you more … just make the communication clear, make them understand what you are saying .It's not for the person (incoherent)..but it's for your conscience to say I did my best…

G. It is important.

B. My final thought is that if you do the job don't do it just for the job, do it for you. The more that you do if for yourself the more confident you become, because you need to feel confident by being yourself. Just do it because you love it, make a change. Make everyone happy

M-I just think social workers are over- rated and people don't like interacting with them but they are trying to do a good thing in helping people have a really good life and I take my hat off to you. Working with the student social workers here is a really good experience. Obviously for the student social workers and for people working here.

L-Listening to individual's experiences helps us to be practical and effective in the right way because we're able to hear from their point of view what exactly it is that people are looking out for and not cause you are told in a lecture this is what it is, this is what you should look out for.

O. I think it's one thing getting taught things in uni but massively different getting taught by the people who experience things themselves. Things by people who uses services themselves.

S. Because we work with people the key is relationships, it's absolutely nothing without relationships I think the more you work with that the more chance you have with understanding people. Yeh.

B. For me it's about hearing different perspectives……not only that but being understanding of where those perspectives have come from and how we as prospective social workers make that change that we don't make the same mistakes.

FG5

Did your experiences of involvement involve challenging prejudicial or discriminatory values ?

D-Yeh, in the classroom we had one person in particular come in, A I think she was called, she does various different things she has various different experiences, she talked about her experiences of domestic abuse and she would ask the question like, what would you do in my situation? And this sort of thing and that encouraged conversations about why didn't you just leave him, why didn't you do this. She would explore some more and say, it's not as easy as this. The group then would have some discussions, because it was a small group, we didn't have more than 20 people in a group , my experience was that we did have quite

discussions about different issues where people would disagree on stuff but it was safe enough for people to say, I'm not sure about this.

B - Coming back to uni having experienced those things on placement, uni doesn't prepare you for them sort of things to happen, they just prepare you; this is the professional role, this is the PCF's etc. This is what you need to do but it doesn't prepare you for what might happen, this is how we deal with it, you have to deal with it by support from obviously you know, your practice educator and stuff, uni don't prepare you for that, some people would have dealt with it different.

 S-I don't think anyone can

D – I know how can it ?

M- but that experience is similar to what we had in college but with a larger class size it doesn't allow for that.

S-It got very heated, I used to switch off and go home and think oh the same people again, always the same people, I am going for a coffee break….

D-you would definitely of hated me. It's an expression of different people at different places in their lives doing this course.

b-Yes at my uni. they have split them up now, put them in two separate teams so there was group A and group B …

M- so how many was in your class sizes then?

S-About 70. Well actually I'll never forget the first time 'cause I walked out once thinking oh well this is a mess, no criticism to the lecturers, I can remember we sat on the floor. Can you remember that tall building? The first thing, we were all sat on the floor, we couldn't physically fit in the classroom. We always had the biggest seminar rooms and I can remember actually one of the lecturers saying, 'it's a good job a few people dropped out'.

M- oh my word, so there physically wasn't room..?

Re – so that would have been daunting for a service user or carer coming into a class full of students, is that why maybe they only had the limited involvement with the one to one recorded conversation and that sort of thing?

B. No, because they used to break us down into groups.

Re. So you did sometimes do things in small groups?

B. Yeh and I know they've capped it now with how many people and I know they only take on so many people that they split in two groups. So, for mine there was 30 people in group but you'd always have people who drop out so I remember in my group there was only about 23 of us left.

Re. So as you are hearing about experiences where there was high levels of involvement and I appreciate that wasn't the case where you were at uni and there was a lot of good learning

from practice, do you think it would have been better if there had been high levels of involvement on your course?

S. I've always said, my feelings are that we should never have got rid of that first placement, I think we needed placement. I think it neds to be evened out, theory to placements, because I think, where you are expected to be in second year, for example people in second year are put on statutory, like safeguarding, I was put on voluntary. There's people who did not get until the end of the year, year 3 who might have just started statutory then and I think that can be quite limiting because you've gone and done little recordings, as much as you know you think, this is really daunting for people, small talk and all that. From the student's point of view with preparing I think it's been detrimental not having that first placement I think there should be a placement every year, I do.

B. Going back, I had a placement in my 3rd year, when it come to my 3rd year placement and being in an assessment team, it was literally 100 days and it felt so quick I wasn't ready to go into the real world and apply for a social work job because I only had that placement the other one was voluntary and so I felt applying for a job I was thinking, do I even know what I'm going to be doing? Some of the stuff when I started my job I didn't know, I didn't know any of the stuff because I wasn't given the opportunity to go on to do different placements . I was on statutory on my last placement on third year so first year, second year felt, do you know what I mean?

M. Do you think the only good kind of education you can get from a service user is when you are on placement ?

B. Yes

D. I disagree

B. My second placement was with young offenders, I used to have to interview them at Holme House I had to interview them and find them accommodation and work with them on the outside . I think with sex offenders they like to tell you every bit of the detail you don't want to listen to , they like to tell you, they like to steer the interview, they like to take control and I really struggled with that because I was only year two. I remember he said 'I raped my nephew' and he went to shake my hand and I remember crying all the way home because I had a little boy the same age as he raped and I was like I can't do it. People were like, you can do it you can. My God what a placement , for people who are like year two, this had tested my personal view and my professional because I remember going home to my three year old son and he's just told me the crime that he's committed. But, I overcome it and I know this is bad to say but I enjoyed the placement and the learning from it. But, it was really challenging. Then I came into year three and I absolutely loved that placement as well

M. But when you are doing placements, we are still the ones who have that power. When you are students what we are talking about when we are in the classroom and service users come in, they have that power.

H. I like listening about their experiences, their experiences of what a good social worker and effective social worker was. I would listen to them and think, I would do that, the experiences where they had shared…

B. See, we didn't have that, we didn't have anyone coming in saying what their experiences where it was just that short snippet, that exercise we never had someone saying this is how they felt, we were treat like this, there was nothing like that, I can't remember anything like that

S. No, we didn't.

M. It's a shame

H. We used to have people coming and talking about their experiences of social workers, they had a voice and I used to think yeh, this is what it's all about.

D. I think they have got to a point where they have been able to reflect on things and give you the learning you need, cause that's the difficulty with being on placement you are in the thick of it aren't you? A lot of people , when you are in the thick of it now aren't in a position to reflect on their learning , they just want to shout at you. The point is, we were lucky I guess, we had people who were able to reflect on that and tell you that they were angry to start with then they were like this and this happened, for us that was really interesting.

Appendix four; Access to Mend the Gap films.

Each project co-produced a five minute recording of participants experiences of a Mend the Gap project;

Mend the Gap with asylum seeker parents

Mend the Gap with unaccompanied asylum seeking minors

Mend the Gap with disabled people.

These are available on request by contacting me directly at;

helen.casey@open.ac.uk

Please state which film/s you wish to receive and the purpose for using these.

Please note, these films are designed for education and practice awareness raising and to support new Mend the Gap projects. They are not permitted to be shared via social media.

Appendix five: Ten Step Guide

Ten Step Guide for Social Workers Supporting Unaccompanied Minors on Arrival (Mend the Gap participants, 2018).

Step 1.

On arrival in the UK young people need to be offered: water, food, warm clothing and a place to rest.

Social Workers should receive as much information as possible about young people they are meeting; name, country of origin, gender.

The social worker and young person should meet with an interpreter and advocacy worker where possible. Where not available e.g., crisis, social worker should have introduction cards in a range of languages.

Welcome, introduction, role, what is about to happen and why.

Age assessments should not be made on arrival.

Step 2.

Accommodation must be suitable to meet young people's cultural needs.

Foster carers should undertake training around cultural awareness, mental health awareness, and dietary needs.

There needs to be a facilitated conversation between foster carer/social worker and interpreter to explain; roles, arrangements, finance, rights, access to an advocate.

Young people need to be given an information sheet about children's/young people's rights and complaints procedures.

Young people need to know emergency numbers and who to contact when they are feeling unsafe.

Step 3.

Health check- ups should be arranged and include:

-Physical and mental well -being.

-eye tests/opticians/dentist.

There should be no age assessments unless there are concerns – exceptional not the norm.

Step 4.

Legal advice should be available to keep young people informed about:

- The status of applications and support.

- Benefits and entitlements.

Education arrangements need to be made to include:

-college/school visit,

-full time attendance,

-intensive English classes.

Step 5.

Access to community activities should include.

-A free leisure pass

-sports clubs membership, e.g., football, running

-support with using transport.

Access to:

-I.T. facilities

-mobile phone.

-pocket money.

Step 6.

Accommodation arrangements must include:

Informed choices about accommodation options, locations.

Orientation into the UK – Cultural norms, laws and customs of the UK.

Independent living skills – cooking, cleaning, shopping, budgeting, to prepare for supported living arrangements.

Wi-Fi /computer access TV – all which aid communication and English language skills.

Step 7.

Regular social work reviews with young person/advocate (if required).

Young person gives feedback on services and support received: comments and complaints.

Young person has copy of support plan translated and / or written in own language, if possible, reviewed with social worker and advocate (if required) once a month.

Step 8.

Young person has access to support groups which focus on:

-Keeping safe

-Children's rights,

-'Mend the Gap'.

Step 9.

Young person has structured activities during holiday periods away from college/school.

Step 10.

This is owned by young people to identify their own aims and objectives.