

# 1. Introduction: Service User Involvement – Social Work Projects and Education with a Gap-Mending Approach in Europe

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In order to become a competent social worker, it is essential to know the perspective of the service users<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) developed a European framework for quality assurance of the social profession (Anghel/Ramon 2009), where the involvement of service users became a key element in social work practice and education (Jones/Radulescu 2006). The role of social workers was adapted to the needs of service users. In other countries, such as Brazil, Canada, Israel and the USA, it is common to involve service users in social work education (Shor/Sykes 2002). In the United Kingdom, the involvement of service users as consultants in social work education (in teaching, selection, admission, assessment of students) has been a mandatory requirement since 2003 (Anghel/Ramon 2009: 186). Generally, service users are more and more included in practice, research and education of social work in different European countries (Schön 2015, 2016). However, in social work practice, research and education, they are usually reduced to the role of information providers and do not actively take part as co-partners or co-researchers (e.g. Beresford/Carr 2012). Furthermore, debates about the involvement of service users are more common in Northern European countries than in German-speaking countries. Nevertheless, there are hardly any publications that explore and reflect the involvement of service users in courses of social work education. For the first

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1 People using social services are called “service users”, “clients”, “customers” or “experts of experience” in the literature based on different arguments that will be discussed in Chapter 2. It will also be explained why the term “service user” is used in this book and how it is defined.

time, this anthology gives an overview of different courses in social work education in European countries, in which service users are included as partners. The main characteristic of these courses is that service users and students of social work share their experiences, they study and work together. They do this, as far as possible, on an equal level by using the gap-mending approach.

### *Gap-Mending Approach*

Mending the gap is a valuable new approach to professional learning and academic teaching (c.f. Chapter 3.1).

The approach was launched in 2012 as the network PowerUs<sup>2</sup> developed a joint vision to mend gaps between social workers and service users in social work education. PowerUs worked at that time with two strategies (Heule/Kristiansen 2013: 15): First with a gap-mending approach to courses and second with gap-mending as a UK strategy of mainstreaming service user participation.

The courses with a gap-mending approach in social work education (Heule/Kristiansen 2013: 4) aim in the first place to empower socially excluded groups. The first strategy consists of joint courses, where social work students study together with students from service user organisations (Heule/Kristiansen 2013: 4). The second strategy was developed in the UK, where service user participation was mainstreamed and requested in all levels of decision making in social work education. The joint courses aims to empower both the social work students and the students from service user organisations that often have been socially excluded in society.

Secondly, the aim of the courses is that the students meet the service users in a situation out of their “role as a social worker” on common ground. This enables a learning process that is based on exploring their needs and views.

Thirdly, during the course, both service users and social workers develop innovative projects together in the field of social work.

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2 Further information about the international network PowerUs can be found on: <http://powerus.se/> or in the film “Mend the gap – A challenge for social work education” (2015): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QExM\\_aA2Mus&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QExM_aA2Mus&feature=youtu.be). Cited: 2016-01-11.

Social workers learn from service users and vice versa, which requires that service users recognise their knowledge, but also their limitations and that they value their experience and knowledge (Beresford 2000: 500-501).

These are the central elements, which guarantee that service users do not only have the role of information providers but are really co-partners in courses of social work education.

Up to now, courses with a gap-mending approach have been conducted in and adapted to several European countries, e.g. Sweden, England, Norway, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland.

Lecturers, tutors, representatives of service user organisations and researchers from these countries are connected through the international network "PowerUs". PowerUs organises exchange meetings to develop the mainstreaming of service user participation. Further, they enhance visits to discuss the latest findings and to promote courses with a gap-mending approach. They also take part in national and international social work conferences to actively promote both courses with a gap-mending approach and the mainstreaming of service user participation.

### *The Structure of the Book*

The aim of this book is to describe several courses with a gap-mending approach in social work education in Europe. Therefore, the main part of this book comprises the presentation, evaluation and discussion of examples of six countries, which are structured into six contributions. The book starts with an introductory chapter for clarifying the range of theoretical approaches of gap-mending methods. It discusses three key terms: user involvement, service user/service user organisations and empowerment. This does not resolve the theoretical challenges with a gap-mending approach, but it stresses the strengths and limitations of these challenges. At the same time, it becomes clear that social workers have to collaborate with service users and understand their personal background. This is easier said than done. One solution would be that they attend courses with a gap-mending approach, where service users and social workers learn and work together on an equal level as far as possible.

The book links experience with user involvement and gap-mending in English-speaking and German-speaking countries. It invites the reader to become familiar with different implementations of courses using a gap-mending approach in various European countries. The courses were devel-

oped and adapted to each country's educational system for social workers, their society's needs and circumstances. There is for instance one course that has already taken place 18 times and is based on a long-standing experience. Other courses have only just gained their first experiences. By presenting such a variety of courses, this book offers an insight into different states and conditions of courses with a gap-mending approach. In addition, each contribution reflects and evaluates the implementations of the gap-mending approach and reveals new perspectives for future development. In order to provide a better orientation for the reader, all the presented examples of courses with a gap-mending approach underlie the same structure:

- context of the course
- concept of the course
- realisation and implementation of the course
- evaluation and critical reflections.

The authors of this anthology have developed and have taught courses in social work education with a gap-mending approach. Additionally, most of them work in user-involved research and practice. Furthermore, they are all part of the international network PowerUs.

***Sweden: Power, Experiences and Mutual Development. Using The Concept of Gap-Mending in Social Work Education:  
Arne Kristiansen and Cecilia Heule***

The authors of this first chapter, Kristiansen and Heule, focus on the initial concept of courses with a gap-mending approach in the school of social work at the Lund University in Sweden. The first six-week course called "Mobilization Course" started in 2005. In this course, students of social work and students from service user organizations studied and developed a project together on an equal level as much as possible. Up until today, it has been carried out 18 times and 626 students (205 students from service user organizations, 398 bachelor students and 23 master students of social work) have completed this course.

The authors firstly explain the term "gap-mending" by pointing out the theoretical discussion about both the power of social workers in front of service users and their discriminations of the structure of social services. In this

setup, the social worker is the expert and the service users are often seen as the problem. With Hasenfeld (1992), the authors argue for a “redistribution of power” in social work practice, where service users obtain more power over their lives. Further, the authors highlight the concept of gap-mending, which is more an analytical approach and less a model or a method. The aim of this approach consists in enabling a mutual learning between service users and students of social work for resolving social problems. The chapter offers the pedagogic reflections and the experiences made with the mobilising course, which shows an important and an effective opportunity to start a process of building a relationship between service users and social workers.

The users’ perspective is addressed in the Swedish social work education at university level in at least one course. However, Kristiansen and Heule pointed out some elements of development for these courses to guarantee an increase of continuing partnership and a learning process between lecturer, students and people who represent different service users’ interests.

The authors discuss some challenges of the course and underline the positive evaluation of students’ discussions during the course. The students’ feedback (including social work students and service user students) was gathered by means of a questionnaire and written reflections at the end of each course. The success of the course is confirmed due to the fact some of the service user students were subsequently invited to attend other courses to share their experiences. Other service user students have even started new user organisations. Several concepts of their projects received funds to implement them in social work practice. Finally, the authors have been invited to national and international meetings and congresses to speak about their work. They are a vital partner in the development of the international network PowerUs.

***Norway: Do Gap-Mending Methods Have any Long-Term Effects? Experiences from the Norwegian Course ‘Meeting Face to Face Creates Insights’:***

***Liv Altmann, Tove Hasvold and Ole Petter Askheim***

The authors, Liv Altmann, Tove Hasvold and Ole Petter Askheim, present an evaluation of a three-week course called “Meeting Face to Face Creates Insights”. The course took place for the first time in 2009 at the Lillehammer University College (LUC) and the course was subsequently repeated six times

with a total of 189 students: 68 service users (external students) and 121 internal bachelor students. In Norway and other countries, these courses are new. Usually, the students either meet service users during their internship or service users are invited to the university as guest speakers. Owing to this setup, the courses with gap-mending methods in Norway have a good basis for being evaluated in the long term. The authors carried out such an evaluation with former external and internal students. The results of this evaluation show long-term outcomes, which the authors discuss under five headlines.

Regarding the positive long-term outcomes, the authors propose that such courses should be organized for all students. Further, the service users (external students) and the social work students (internal students) are regarded as valuable contributors to a change in social work practice, which entails more than just expressing respect and tolerance towards each other. Finally, the authors give important advice on organizing and implementing successful courses.

***England: Gap-Mending: Developing a New Approach to User and Carer Involvement in Social Work Education:  
Peter Beresford, Helen Casey and John MacDonough***

This chapter takes account of the history of social work in the UK. In the British history of social work, both the regulation of charity and commitment to social citizenship as well as the equalization of opportunity have always been emphasized. The authors, Beresford, Casey and MacDonough, explain with a historical overview, the vanguard development of social work and why user involvement in policy and practice was established already in the 1990s. Since 2003, user involvement in social work education has been compulsory. However, the first courses with gap-mending methods were introduced at the London South Bank University (LSBU) in 2012 and at New College Durham (NCD) in 2014. The authors explain the different developments of both courses, which show the importance of considering the needs of the single university context. At LSBU, the delivery of the 12-week module with sessions once a week called “Advocacy, Partnership and Participation” was supported by professional regulatory bodies. This chapter shows the importance of the refinement of the concept of the module, revealed by an initial research study, which was conducted with a focus group of service users and bachelor students of social work. The authors report the results of the study. In a very

different way, the first gap-mending course at NCD was initiated by a practice organisation and by service users in order to close the gap between social workers and service users. The authors explain how they developed the programme of the course in nine meetings. Further, the chapter explores the successful implementation of this gap-mending methodology pilot project. Nine parents (seven mothers and two fathers) ran the course and eight students of social work and one of community health participated in it. The authors highlight the mainly positive aspects and mention only one that is negative, which was the inadequate service of provision and support. The authors stressed that both programmes had a positive influence on other programmes and co-operations in social work education. Finally, the chapter makes an important contribution to the ongoing political, ideological and academic discussions in the UK. The authors consider the gap-mending approach as an evidence-based alternative to the ongoing regressive direction of understanding social work. They argue that the gap-mending approach is of international interest and it has to be linked to the roots of social work in the UK.

***Denmark: Interdisciplinary Gap-Mending Courses as Part of R&D Projects at the Metropolitan University College:  
Ann Rasmussen and Camusa Hatt***

The focus of the chapter of Ann Rasmussen and Camusa Hatt is on the important role that gap-mending methods play in local innovation projects formed as interdisciplinary courses in the bachelor curriculum of social work, nursing, occupational therapy and other welfare studies at the Metropolitan University College in Denmark. This university college has offered several courses with service user involvement. However, the presented courses have in common that they are innovation projects focussing on one specific practice challenge with one user group previously identified by Metropolitan and confirmed by service providers. Further, users, students and volunteers work as co-creators of new ideas and solutions, whereas service providers participate as guests or clients.

Different from the previous chapters, the authors of this chapter apply the abbreviated term “user” and not the term service user in order to emphasize the wider user context. They discuss two six-week courses, which provide new solutions to two specific and current welfare challenges. The first course aimed at offering new services or at the improvement of existing services for the increas-

ing number of Danish veterans with serious psychological injuries. The second course focused on new or improved health initiatives for refugees and immigrants from non-western countries living in social housing estates. The chapter highlights the different steps of the development of each course and how difficulties, as for example recruiting service users, were resolved. The authors explain how the structure of each course was adapted to the practice issue. The first course was conducted with eight service users and 12 students from six different welfare study programmes (including social work, nursing and occupational therapy). They started by spending two days together in a rural setting in order to get acquainted. Afterwards, they worked in smaller groups. 40 users participated in the second project, which consisted of four workshops, some of which took place in the social housing estates on Fridays after the mosque prayers. The authors discuss the challenges that the interdisciplinary team of students and teachers had to face. They also underline how the second course was based on the experience of the first one. Both projects had a great positive effect and impact on the users, students and providers.

***Germany: Service User Involvement at Esslingen University of Applied Sciences: Background, Concept and Experiences:  
Thomas Heidenreich and Marion Laging***

In their chapter, Thomas Heidenreich and Marion Laging present their experiences with service user involvement seminars at Esslingen University of Applied Sciences. The description of the approach developed in Esslingen is embedded in a presentation of social work education in Germany including a brief historical sketch. Only in recent decades, social work has been regarded as an academic discipline, although with few systematic contact approaches with service users or the popular self-help groups. Against this background, the authors reveal the successful implementation of the approach of user involvement in the existing bachelor module called “student project”. Within this module, they developed a two-semester course inspired by the early work of the PowerUs network. There, lecturers design a project with the students, in which service users are included. A special feature of the Esslingen approach is that students collaborate actively and in a participatory way in shaping the formats, choosing possible participants and themes for the service user seminars. The first group of eight students started after this preparatory work in 2014 with the aim to answer the crucial question “What is good so-

cial work?“. A two-day seminar was held with service users from the field of mental illness and addiction. The output was a DVD containing the service users’ answers to the question above. Based on this first experience, the second project started in 2015 using the same participatory inclusion of students. It concentrated on people with mental health service experiences including participants from EX-IN training (Experienced Involvement) which shows a large overlap in aims and approaches to user involvement. Both students and lecturers organized a meeting for service users who had taken part in previous courses as well as for lecturers who teach mental health. Two further projects were run during the same time. The first two projects mentioned above involved 26 students and 30 service users. The detailed report and evaluation of both show positive effects. On the one hand, they enabled students to experience in-depth discussions with service users on an eye-to-eye level and on the other hand, EX-IN graduates were introduced to the university setting. The authors conclude their chapter by outlining further possibilities for developing this concept in their department as well as for user involvement approaches in general. They mention the important challenges that have to be faced in the future.

***Switzerland: First Approaches on an Implementation of Courses with a Gap-Mending Approach:  
Véronique Eicher and Emanuela Chiapparini***

The chapter of Eicher and Chiapparini first explores the situation of service user organizations and user involvement in Switzerland. The authors note that there are not many examples of user involvement in the field of social work, even though self-help groups are quite prevalent in Switzerland. They present some exceptional projects of user involvement in the domain of mental health, in the prevention of substance abuse and in the field of poverty. In social work education, internships, visits to social services and the involvement of service users for individual talks or presentations are well established. However, service users are not really involved in the development of courses and do not normally participate for the duration of an entire course. Against this background, the focus of this chapter is to present the first steps of implementing a course with the gap-mending approach in social work education at the Zurich University of Applied Sciences. The authors present the concept of a three-day course at the bachelor degree level with the title “Empowerment in Social

Work: Encounters of Students and Service Users without the Official and Contractual Relationship”. It is inspired by the courses of the Lund University. The authors have also evaluated a first introduction to the topic of service user involvement in an ongoing master degree module. This chapter is helpful for readers who are interested in implementing a course with the gap-mending approach in social work education, where such an approach is less known.

In the third chapter, the conclusions highlight common issues and main elements along with differences between all examples. It draws back to the theoretical background and gives some perspectives.

This book presents the implementation of different courses of user involvement with a gap-mending approach and shows why those courses are such an important element of social work education. It also reveals the challenges that can be met and how they may be tackled. Additionally, this book would like to invite the reader to apply this approach by offering a broad overview of implementations of courses in European countries. It takes different political, educational and economical frameworks into consideration. The contributions present helpful suggestions and stimulate further implementations. Finally, the book aims to intensify the discussions about service user involvement in the education of social work in English and German-speaking countries.

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