Communication skills training for improving the communicative abilities of student social workers: a systematic review

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Title of the review

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Background

Good communication is fundamental to social work practice (Sidell & Smiley, 2008; Lishman, 2009; Koprowska, 2014; Cournoyer, 2016; Healy, 2018). Conversely, the perils of failing to communicate effectively are well documented, particularly where child deaths are concerned (Laming, 2003, 2009; Munro, 2011). Recognising that improvements to social work practice and social work education are required (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Narey, 2014), communication skills are taught on the social work curriculum in a number of countries, featuring in various professional and educational standards for social work (AASW, 2008; CSWE, 2015; BASW, 2018). A wide range of communication skills training programmes exist, yet knowledge about their effectiveness is limited (Trevithick et al., 2004). This review seeks to synthesize the existing evidence to examine whether communication skills training is effective in improving the communication skills of social work students with the aim of informing policy and practice in social work education.

Policy relevance

The importance of teaching communication skills to social work students is widely acknowledged (Lishman, 2009), hence communication skills training is mandatory in a number of countries. In England, communication skills became a core subject of the social work curriculum in 2003 when the new degree was introduced to raise professional standards. However, since concerns over social work practice and education have continued, further policy changes have ensued. In 2009, the Social Work Task Force made a number of recommendations, including the introduction of designated skills days, many of which are reserved for communication skills training. As a result, communication skills courses have been developing in a number of ways, incorporating the use of video technology and involving service users and carers in curriculum delivery and design. Similar trends are occurring in other countries. To assess the impact that communication skills training has on the development of social work students' communicative abilities, a systematic review is required.

Objectives

Does communication skills training improve the communication skills of social work students?

Existing reviews

A knowledge review was conducted by Trevithick et al. (2004) on behalf of the Social Care Institute for Excellence into the teaching and learning of communication skills in social work education. Since then, both communication skills training and the methodology for evaluating outcomes in social work education have developed. This review is required to provide an update on those developments. Whilst recent systematic reviews exist for the effectiveness of communication skills training for health professions in mental health and oncology, their absence in social work, and at pre-qualifying level, is a noticeable gap in the research literature.

Intervention

For this systematic review, studies evaluating the effectiveness of communication skills training for social work students will only be included if a control condition has been applied. The control condition in this review can include a control group with no intervention (i.e. studies where the intervention group is compared with a group not receiving skills training at all), a control group with intervention as usual (i.e. studies where the intervention group is compared with those receiving the standard practice), a wait-list control group (i.e. studies where the intervention group is compared with a group of selected individuals who wait a period of time to receive the same intervention) or a placebo group (i.e. studies where the intervention group is compared with an intervention that is not expected to produce any change). Control groups can be selected by using random or non-random methods.

Population

Any academic institution teaching communication skills to social work students can be included. Students in any year of a social work qualifying course (undergraduate or postgraduate) will be eligible.

Outcomes

Outcomes of interest include measureable changes in behaviours or skills. Studies which rely on satisfaction or self-efficacy measures alone will not be included in this review. Since Vitali (2011) found no significant correlation between students' self-ratings and practice educators' ratings of performance in relation to social work competencies, studies will only be included if the behaviours and skills are rated by observers. Observer ratings are seen to offer a more valid and reliable method than relying on students' self-ratings (Carpenter, 2005).

Study designs

For outcomes related to the effects of communication skills training, study designs that allow for attribution will be sought. These include experimental (including randomized controlled trials and cluster randomized controlled trials) and quasi-experimental designs (e.g., before-and-after designs with control or comparison group/groups), if available, as well as observational studies. Experimental and quasi-experimental studies will be selected, based on the premise that they seek to measure the effectiveness of interventions by excluding alternative explanations for change. Single group designs and qualitative studies will be excluded.

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Lead review author: The lead author is the person who develops and co-ordinates the review team, discusses and assigns roles for individual members of the review team, liaises with the editorial base and takes responsibility for the on-going updates of the review.

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Roles and responsibilities

The first author, Emma Reith Hall, has expertise regarding the review content through her experience as a social work lecturer teaching communication skills to social work students. The second author, Paul Montgomery, has methodological expertise, having conducted a number of systematic reviews on a variety of subjects. Both authors have access to colleagues with statistical expertise and information retrieval expertise to assist them with these aspects of the review.

Funding

The first author, Emma Reith Hall is in receipt of an ESRC PhD studentship.

Potential conflicts of interest

There are no known conflicts of interest for either of the authors.

Preliminary timeframe

Note, if the protocol or review is not submitted within six months and 18 months of title registration, respectively, the review area is opened up for other authors.

- Date you plan to submit a draft protocol: July 2018
- Date you plan to submit a draft review: January 2020