

Record

118

File Number

10091

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Title: Consumer participation: A challenge for service providers

Original source: Community Bulletin Vol 16 No 1

Resource type: Written

Publication Date: 01/01/92

Publisher info: -

Abstract

Current service philosophies of Social Role Valorisation, the advent of the self advocacy movement and new legislation have all contributed to the current emphasis on consumer views being sought and used in shaping service delivery to ensure it is individualised. However, how 'consumer participation' can be achieved and just what it means is not always clear. The article criticises consumer participation strategies (e.g. Individual Program Plans) which still render the consumer in a dependent role and which do not elicit a true consumer perspective. Strategies which ensure strengthening the role of the individual in service delivery are provided. **Keyword: Individualisation**

Consumer Participation: A Challenge for Service Providers

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The term 'consumer participation' has begun to appear frequently in the literature addressing the provision of services to people with an intellectual disability. However, just what the term means and how consumer participation can be achieved have been addressed to a far lesser extent. Current service philosophies of normalisation/social role valorisation, the advent of the self-advocacy movement and new legislation such as the proposed Anti-Discrimination Act have all contributed to the current emphasis on consumer views being sought and used in shaping service delivery. Significantly, it is the very art of determining consumer views and needs that, to a large extent, remains a challenge to service providers. In the context of this article, the term 'consumer' is used to identify the individual who is directly receiving services.

According to Brechin and Swain (1988), "Even where client groups are recognised as independent and effective members of society, there are strong resistances to this changing professional role. Where severe learning difficulties are involved, the resistances do not arise just from clinging to older, more comfortable attitudes and practices, but also from a genuine uncertainty about how to proceed".

Currently, the participation and involvement of consumers in service delivery to people with an intellectual disability is being facilitated in a variety of ways. Some of these methods involve consumers contributing to their Individual Planning process, the use of advocates, relatives and staff to make judgements about needs and preferences, the use of questionnaires to elicit consumer opinions and consumer representation on committees.

The assumption on which these methods are based is that through their use, consumer views are accurately obtained. This assumption has been challenged by a number of authors.

Research studies have shown that a consumer's perception of these methods is frequently different from the intention of service providers. Research also indicates that involving the consumer in setting goals through the Individual Planning process is viewed by the consumer as just another training event (Crocker, 1990). Other consumer participation strategies have been described as 'manipulation of the individual by well meaning others' (Brandon and Ridley, 1985). The use of questionnaires to elicit consumer views has been criticised because the ability of the consumer to respond is influenced by the type of questionnaire used (Flynn, 1986). Consumer participation in committees has also been criticised because of the suggestibility of many consumers.

Brechin and Swain (1988) describe normalisation as having been adopted by many professionals as a 'marketing strategy' which still renders the consumer in a dependent role. Other studies have shown that what relatives and staff perceive as the consumer's viewpoint, is not an accurate perception of what the consumer thinks. (Brandon and Ridley, 1985) In addition to these criticisms, many processes demand high degrees of participation by consumers and do not cater for the lack of experience most consumers have had in exercising the most basic choices.

The above critique of consumer participation strategies and their inability to elicit a true consumer perspective is the basis for most services not attempting to obtain consumer opinions. The issue which needs to be addressed is not whether consumer participation is a useful and integral part of service delivery, but how it can be done in an effective way. The commitment to consumer participation must be clearly stated by managers in service provision and staff at all levels in the organisation need to be consulted if strategies are to succeed .

As is pointed out by many authors (Cottle, 1990) consumers cannot participate in planning services when they remain uninformed about their rights. One of the essential components of consumer participation is educating consumers about their rights. One of the common myths about consumer participation is that consumers are not able to participate. According to Brandon and Ridley (1985), the issue is not that consumers cannot participate, but that service providers do not ask or do not listen. There is a need for better education of staff to enable them to interpret consumer behaviour as a means by

which consumers do exercise choice and participate.

Service providers also need to be aware of factors which contribute to consumer participation.

A number of strategies used to validate information obtained by interviewing consumers with an intellectual disability may also be used in the day to day interactions between agency staff and consumers to obtain an accurate picture of the consumer's views. Such strategies include:

- the use of simply phrased, open ended questions;
- asking questions in several ways and in several formats and comparing answers to check consistency;
- the use of pictures, even with verbal consumers to increase responsiveness;
- avoidance of questions which require a response involving time and frequency;
- examining different domains of consumers' lives and corroborating evidence from alternative sources (Flynn, 1986).

Flynn (1986) stresses the importance of 'being attentive to an individual' and observing such things as the pleasure experienced in some situations and the avoidance of other situations by consumers to ascertain their opinions and feelings. Consumer participation cannot be done without strengthening the role of the individual in service delivery. It is essential for organisations to create opportunities for consumers to express choice in ordinary aspects of their lives such as what they wear, when they eat, what they drink, etc. Services need to ensure that when consumers do participate, their views will be heard. Procedures need to be established for the inevitable resolution of conflict between what the consumer may want and what the service is able or willing to provide.

Viewing services from a consumer's perspective requires a new way of relating to consumers and often a change in attitudes.

Brechin and Swain, in discussing the importance of changing the staff/consumer relationship to one of a working alliance, stress six important principles:

"We would suggest that from the perspective of people with learning difficulties, a working alliance with professionals should seem:

1. to be an entitlement rather than an imposition;
2. to promote self realisation rather than compliance;
3. to open up choices rather than replace one option with another;
4. to develop opportunities, relationships and patterns of living in line with their individual wishes, rather than rule of thumb normality;
5. to enhance the decision making control of their own lives;
6. to allow them to move at their own pace." (Brechin and Swain, 1988)

The goal of consumer participation will only be achieved when the nature of staff/client interactions change. When management and staff practices allow input from consumers to occur by valuing consumer contributions, asking consumers what they want and listening and responding to consumers, participation will become a meaningful process for consumers.

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