Winston Churchill Memorial Trust
Fellowship Report

Relationship and Sex Education Matters

Kai Wooder, 2012
Toronto and New York City
Acknowledgements
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Introduction

Why I wanted to go and what I wanted to learn

Having worked specifically in the sexual health field for 7 years and more generally with young people for much longer I felt it was time for me to challenge my own practice, values and actions by visiting, understanding and learning from both professionals and young people in North America. I've always been clear that the work we do at Brook is exceptional and that we are a pioneering, effective and brave organisation. From my fellowship experience I wanted to ascertain if my own knowledge, skills and experience were still a good match for Brook and also to explore ways to improve future practice. I also instinctively believe that educators all over the world will find fresh, creative and unique ways to engage and work with young people and I wanted to see innovative practice first hand.

Relationships and Sexual Health

Consensual relationships and good sexual health impact positively on a person’s health and well being. Having an interest in sex and relationships is a natural part of adolescence along with the potential for risk taking and experiential learning. Whilst not wanting to limit any young person’s journey into adulthood, sexual health professionals do want to ensure that all young people can enjoy their sexuality without harm and for them to be free from exploitation. Finding the balance between being concerned for young people’s welfare and also being positive about sex has forever been a tricky issue for parents, professionals and significant others. Unfounded fears and moral panics about the impact of talking about sex and relationships with teenagers still remain high and as a result Relationships and Sex Education in the UK is patchy with many young people saying it is too biological, too little, too late.

What has always felt ironic to me is that young people receive messages about sex, relationships, gender and sexuality all the time and from many different sources including the media, internet and peers and as you can imagine some of the messages are very contradictory. Effective relationships and sex education helps young people to make sense of these messages and to make informed decisions about their own health and well being – and whilst I firmly believe that this is only a positive outcome, why then, do we still struggle locally and nationally to influence policy and practice in schools and youth settings? Why do young people feel even more isolated from sex and relationships education if they are lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans? Why are there growing concerns around the sexualisation of young people, violence in teenage relationships and the prevalence of sexual exploitation?

These thoughts and questions helped me to firm up my learning goals for my fellowship and made the research and planning a little clearer. It felt important for me to visit organisations in Toronto and New York City that were addressing issues of Relationships and Sex Education in their own unique ways. I wanted to visit projects that had a similar goal, focus or vision to Brook so that my learning remained close to my practice and therefore more likely
to be transferable and impacting. This was a decision I made quite early on and so my planning was tailored accordingly.

Toronto
I arrived in Toronto with an action packed programme ahead of me. The city itself was inspiring; Toronto was described by the UN as ‘the most cosmopolitan city in the world’ due to the fact that it is the most multi-cultural. The city not only embraces difference but it also celebrates it and there is a cultural celebration event happening in the city almost every month of the year. The city is vibrant, energised and busy.

One of the many benefits of a fellowship award is that you also get to experience cities from a different point of view. If I had been solely on the tourist trail in Toronto I would have came away from the city with a limited point of view. Having the opportunity to move outside of mainstream areas and to visit workers, communities, suburbs and focused groups was real eye opener and a real privilege.

Key visits and important learning

Planned Parenthood Toronto (PPT)
This organisation has been established for over 50 years and is very much focussed on promoting healthy sexuality and informed decision-making. Its service delivery also has similarities to Brook in that it offers Education and Training, Clinical Services and Advocacy and Campaigning. The staff were very supportive of me and also generous with their time and willingness to discuss and share their practice. I was able to spend time with staff working in different service areas which aided my experience and my learning;

TEACH Programme
This service has a focus on sexuality training within schools; both with young people and with teaching staff. Although we have growing initiatives like this in the UK, none are as advanced or integrated into the whole school approach. In Canada there is a compulsory element to their curriculum called Equity Education which stipulates that schools have to address issues linked to homophobic bullying. This opens the door for the TEACH programme to happen although they have still faced opposition and resistance over the years. The team have delivered some high impacting work within the Toronto area and they also involve young people and volunteers. They have recently been awarded funding to develop a practitioners resource pack and this should hopefully be available to us in 2013.

My key learning from meeting with TEACH service managers was to think more straightforwardly about the link between policy and practice. One worker’s quote sums it up ‘policy is our friend, we must learn it and use it’ – in other words, when faced with moral opposition and objection, don’t get pulled into the argument, instead look to policy for clear guidance and
highlight the professional and sometimes legal obligation that services, schools and professionals have to offer young people unbiased information, education and support.

**PEER Education and Volunteering**
This was a very interesting area of learning for me as the focus was on how to engage and utilise volunteers within a clinical setting. As someone from an Educational background but who links into clinical services at Brook I was keen to learn as much as possible from the PPT team. It is very easy to resist the use of volunteers in clinical settings for various reasons including confidentiality and quality assurance; the barriers often seem too difficult to overcome. It was brilliant then to see an organisation who were taking a different approach. PPT actively encourage the recruitment of young volunteers to work in their sexual health clinics. The volunteers are all under 30 yrs old and they commit to a training programme before being introduced into clinical environments. Once trained, volunteers have on-going support from a dedicated member of the clinical team which includes training and supervision. Within clinic the volunteers will welcome young people into the service, they will facilitate ‘first visit’ sessions which includes giving an overview of the service, note taking client information for files, discussing any relevant issues and talking about sexual health. All volunteers commit to at least 1 clinical session per week and the majority are students, ex service users or those studying towards medical/youth focussed qualifications. This really opened my eyes to a new model of involvement that we could possibly explore at Brook.

My key learning from this visit was to focus on overcoming barriers rather than creating them particularly when exploring young people’s involvement in service delivery.

**Teen Programming**
This service is very similar to the Ask Brook initiative in that young people can email/phone the organisation for information and advice about relationships and sexual health. Again, young people’s involvement is key and it was great to meet some young people who work on the website and phone-lines. Their involvement ensured that young people contacting the service could access Peer Support and for the Peers themselves, they felt that they were offering an important service and that as a result their own skills, experience and confidence had increased.

**Community Health**
I met with an inspirational practitioner who fearlessly pioneers new and much needed work in some of the poorer boroughs of Toronto which includes delivering sexual health courses for new comers. In Canada the term ‘new comer’ is used to describe someone who has been in the country for 5 years or less. It makes perfect sense that as someone is integrating themselves into a new country, culture and environment that providing them with support
and education around sexual health, services, sexuality, the law etc is relevant and essential. The team also work in secondary schools and at the time of my visit there was one large secondary school where all of the pupils were new comers, 100%. This made me think a lot about integration, the school system and how communities evolve. Offering inclusive sexual health education for all is an ongoing challenge for many practitioners but through spending time with the PPT worker I started to understand the elements of their approach that make their work so effective; they start with a well articulated value base, they will try anything once, they work closely with partner agencies, they ask questions if they don’t understand and they work on the assumption that all young people regardless of age, time spent in Canada, culture, religion, family, home life etc all experience sexuality in some way or another and that they have the right to explore it and to have the support to make sense of it.

In addition....
As well as these key visits at PPT I also met with other staff and volunteers who talked me through their approach to community research, mental health and well being and the delivery of women’s services including a relationship violence project. I could write and write about my positive experience of this organisation. They are bold, brave and passionate professionals who are leading the way in Toronto.

Youth Line, Toronto
This organisation demonstrates how effectively communities can respond when a need is identified. Managed by a small team within a health centre, Youth Line is a support service for young people who are LGBTQ and who want to talk to LGBTQ peers for support. Youth Line recruit volunteers to the project and then deliver a programme of training that focuses on sexuality issues, offer phone-line support and advice, signposting etc. Young people deliver the service for other young people which again highlighted to me the role that peers and volunteers can have at service delivery levels. In addition to the vital support service Youth Line also hold an annual awards event which recognises young people’s achievements and well as community based projects.

My key learning from this visit was again linked to young people’s involvement as peers and volunteers. I facilitate a LGBT youth group in Merseyside and I realised that there is so much more we could do to provide group members with the opportunity to be more involved i.e. running our group’s website, promoting the group to agencies and professional etc.

SIECANN and Dr Alex Mackay, Toronto
I was determined to meet with Dr Mackay as I had long admired his work in the field of sexual health policy and guidance within Canada. Dr Mackay and the team at SIECANN produce very clear guidance for schools around the delivery of SRE and they also produce high quality short papers about
current issues relating to sexual health. They demonstrate the balance between policy and practice – they understand what practitioners need in order to drive effective work forward and at the same time they understand the external pressures and some of the barriers placed on policy makers.

Dr Mackay talked me through the theoretical framework that is used across Canada when planning, delivering and evaluating sex and relationships education. This framework IMB (Information, Behaviour and Skills) has been in use for over 20 years and is now fully integrated into front-line delivery in school settings as well as with the commissioners of sexual health services. I will talk more about the impact of this visit later on in my report.

And there’s more.....
In addition to the above I also visited an accommodation project, a community based health centre and the main LGBT centre.

Toronto services were all very welcoming and opened their doors to me with openness and a desire to share and learn in return. I completely understand why Canada in particular is a popular destination for Winston Churchill Fellows and long may it continue to be.

New York City
I arrived in NYC a little less certain. It had been more difficult to arrange visits and meetings in New York and also it was quite a change of pace and environment from Toronto. I had less time than I had in Canada and wanted to make best use of it. I had a few meetings lined up and some contacts and most of my time was spent trying to turn ‘maybes’ into realities.

It felt important for me to visit NYC as although it is referred to as the greatest city on earth; it also has many challenges to overcome. In terms of sexual health there are high rates of teenage pregnancy particularly for young Hispanic women and also in areas of high deprivation. NYC services have to accommodate a highly populated state which also has an additional transient tourist population to contend with. NYC services are also facing similarly fierce funding cuts to those of us in the UK.
Key visits and important learning

LGBT Centre, SOHO
Prior to my travels I made contact with the LGBT centre in NYC. The staff were very welcoming and accommodating and invited me to join them for their annual end of summer BBQ as well as follow-up meetings.

The BBQ was hosted by the centre and was to celebrate young people and their contributions to the summer work. Because I work with a relatively small LGBT group I was imagining quite an intimate event – I couldn’t have been more wrong. There were at least 100 people in attendance and at least half of those were young people who engage in some way with the LGBT centre. It was magical for me and I got to spend time sitting and talking to young people about their experiences of being gay, of school life, of home life and of their hopes and aspirations. Many young people talked about being completely isolated because of travel costs (a current and growing issue in the UK). Many of the young people lived in Brooklyn and finding the $5 to travel into and back out of NYC each day was not easy. For many young people this added to their experiences of feeling isolated and restricted by their circumstances.

A group of young people presented a project they had managed which linked to an anti-smoking campaign. This was really refreshing to see and it consisted of a short film (hilarious) and resources that had been designed by the group. It highlighted that work with LGBT young people doesn’t have to be solely LGBT focussed – sexuality aside, we are all still impacted by health, education, families, aspiration and everything else!

Global Action Project
I was lucky enough to have a meeting with the team at GAP and then a meeting with their Director. GAP are a truly grassroots, non-conformist organisation who work to their value base and hold a very strong line with regards to their organisational core values.

Essentially their work focuses on high quality and creative media projects that are most often linked to young people’s campaigns and real issues that young people want to highlight. The foundations of the organisation lie with young people’s participation and involvement; they talked me through ‘youth organising’ as a process for young people to bring about sustainable and effective change.

We talked a lot about the impact of funding cuts and the challenges of income generation. GAP explained that although they are in great need of funding, they would not change their mission, vision and value base in order to secure funding. They have survived turbulence over the years as well as
creating many opportunities including service development and organisational growth. This meeting had a genuine impact on me as I’d been previously thinking about how far organisations should adapt to meet the need of funders. We are in testing times and the challenge for many will be the balance between ethos/survival. I felt confident about my own convictions after meeting with GAP and determined to stay focused and confident. My key learning is that change is consistent and by ‘holding tight’ a different and more positive change will be ahead for us.

And there’s more....
In addition to these key visits I also visited ‘The Door’ which is a comprehensive youth support agency in NYC. Having been established for nearly 40 years, the range of services, educational programmes and opportunities for young people has grown and developed. Although not specific to sexual health, I was keen to see how a ‘one stop’ approach to youth services worked.

Whilst in Brooklyn I came across a man who was quite literally on a mission – his goal was to visit high schools across the USA to encourage kindness and to reduce bullying:
Key learning from my fellowship
My learning was vast and possibly not even all of it has sunk in yet but there are 3 areas of my practice that were greatly influenced and improved as a result of my fellowship:

Young People’s Participation
Although I’ve always been an advocate for young people’s participation in services I developed a greater understanding for;

- **The different levels of participation that can be achieved:**
  This includes creating opportunities for peer-educators and volunteers to genuinely have a role in how services are organised and how they develop. This involves an investment of time, resources, patience, skill sharing and trust and the outcomes can be amazing for both the organisation and the young people involved. I came away from my fellowship with a renewed understanding and a commitment to no longer pay ‘lip service’ to participation and to find sustainable approaches in my own work with young people.

- **The different barriers that we all as professionals can create:**
  I realised that creating genuine and meaningful opportunities for young people to participate can be very time consuming for already busy staff teams and as a result we may create barriers to addressing the issue. Learning how young people are involved in clinical services in Toronto and in Campaigning work in NYC has inspired me to explore new ways of working in Wirral. Brook nationally has an excellent model of participation, particularly with regards to young people having a voice, making decisions and creating/delivering high profile and influential campaigns but I want to think more proactively about ways we can involve young people in the delivery of our educational and clinical services.

Theoretical Frameworks
Through meeting with Dr Alex Mackay and other professional teams I came away from my fellowship with a clearer view of the benefits of having a theoretical framework to underpin educational work. This was an opportunity for me to work through my thoughts/concepts with experienced professionals and policy writers. Having a consistent and well thought through framework for education can serve to improve practice rather than restrict it and the benefits in terms of quality and impact are evident. This gave me the knowledge, confidence and evidence base to prepare a proposal to explore the link between theory and practice within our educational work at Brook.
Light Bulb Moments
Alongside the specific visits and meetings I was fortunate enough to have, there were also moments of learning and bright ideas that happened almost incidentally but which have greatly impacted on my practice, for example:

- **Language:** I met with services who regularly review and explore the language they use. It made me question my own approach to language which is possibly quite lazy and encouraged me to think more proactively about this on my return. For example on all paperwork in Toronto, the question of ‘Gender’ is not linked specifically to ‘Male’ or ‘Female’ but encompasses the range of identities that any one of us may choose. It struck me how important a thought process is to genuine inclusivity.

- **The experience of waiting:** I visited many waiting rooms in sexual health services, clinics etc and saw first-hand how some services are working to make the experience of waiting as comfortable as possible. Almost every waiting room I visited had wifi as a given and it made complete sense as the majority of young people were checking emails, face book, twitter etc and as a result they were not looking at the clock and feeling frustrated about time. Some waiting rooms also had computers for service users to use, children’s play areas/toys and also different seating areas so that you could sit away from the main waiting area if this felt more comfortable.

- **Creativity:** almost every educational professional that I met was willing to try anything once and to think about new approaches, ideas, resources and sessions. The culture is positive and there were no fears about ‘getting something wrong’ more a realistic approach to ‘seeing what works and learning from what doesn’t’. This was very refreshing.

Transference of Learning (Making it Count)
I think a real test of whether or not my fellowship has been successful will be in how I use my learning to advance practice. It is very important to me to keep the momentum of my learning going and to share my findings with as many interested and relevant people as possible. Since my return to the UK I have:

1. Proposed a theoretical framework for our Education work to our Head of Education and our Executive Director for Quality and Safeguarding

2. Had the go-ahead to propose the same framework to the Education staff across Brook via our annual Education conference. This led to the IMB Model (as learnt in Toronto) being adopted by the staff teams and could lead to positive changes to the way we plan, deliver and articulate our work. The proposal needs to be approved at Trustee level and will go forward for discussion in March 2013
3. Met with our Participation Lead to discuss my learning and in particular models of participation at service delivery levels

4. Worked with young people in Wirral to develop a local project to reduce homophobic bullying called Love Is Love

**Following on from the writing of this report I will now:**

1. Officially disseminate my learning and findings with my education colleagues at Brook
2. Present my learning and findings to our key strategic sexual health groups in Wirral
3. Offer to deliver a training session to members of the Rank network
4. Initiate a ‘creative process’ at Brook where workers feel able to try out new ideas and to report back on outcomes
5. Continue working with colleagues to explore ways to increase young people’s participation at service delivery level
6. Continue to develop my own practice and to keep learning from others

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**Contact**
Kai Wooder is the Regional Education Lead, North for Brook – the UK’s leading young people’s sexual health organisation and is also a regional tutor for the George Williams College. Kai is also a member of the Rank network and until recently was vice-chair of the yarn steering group.

If you are interested in discussing any issues raised in this report with Kai you can contact her at kai@wirralbrook.org.uk or kaiwooder@gmail.com