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Social work education and practice

Planning for the future

● **Wes Shera and Marion Bogo**

All societies are facing rapid social and economic changes that have an impact on social work practice and education. Schools of social work have a responsibility to take leadership in anticipating, understanding and analyzing these changes. They can alter their educational programs to incorporate new knowledge and approaches to practice so that their academic programs are responsive to new societal issues and circumstances.

In an attempt to increase the capacity of schools of social work and the profession to plan for the future, the Canadian Committee of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work, in collaboration with the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work and the Canadian Association of Social Workers, has initiated a long-term project to assess the impact of current societal pressures and changes on social work practice and education. As a first step it was felt to be critical to review the international literature on previous futures studies in social work in order to learn about the conceptual and methodological issues important in conducting such a study in Canada. There are no current reviews of futures studies in social work; the literature is anecdotal, notional or descriptions of single case studies. This article makes a significant contribution to addressing this gap and should be instructive to schools of social work in other parts of the world and facilitate cross-national exchange of ideas and approaches.

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The changing environment

The societal pressures that may continue to shape the future of social work and hence social work education in many countries are several.

1. The fiscal austerity of governments.
2. Cutbacks in educational funding.
3. Increasing pressures on the community to respond effectively to the impact of government downloading.
4. The demands for accountability in all aspects of human service delivery and management.
5. Changes in information technologies.
6. Demographic changes (Crane et al., 1994; Jarmin-Rohde et al., 1997; McNutt, 1996; Raffoul and McNece, 1996).

Furthermore, we live in an era of contradiction in which social needs appear to be relentlessly growing while social programs designed to address these needs continue to experience financial cutbacks (Matsuoka et al., 1993).

Social work is being dramatically affected on many fronts: for example, in North America, influenced by a neo-conservative political philosophy, there have been dramatic cutbacks in publicly funded services. Hospitals and schools are reducing the number of social workers they employ; social service agencies are cutting services and relying on short-term interventions; and the budgets of child protective services are under extreme pressure even as social workers are being called into question as a result of the deaths of children. These factors pose a formidable challenge to those responsible for the education of social workers in Canada and elsewhere. What kind of social welfare system will be in place in 10–20 years, and what role will social workers play in this future social welfare system? How many social workers will be needed in the future? How should social workers be educated for the future needs of society within this turbulent environment? What role do educators and researchers play in shaping the future of the social welfare system? Should educators and researchers respond only to present problems and the needs of governments and social welfare organizations, or should there be proactive planning to meet future requirements? While it is beyond the scope of this article to address these issues in detail they do provide convincing evidence of the importance of undertaking ‘futures studies’.

Conceptual framework

The key to exploring the future of social work education requires an understanding of the broader context within which such education occurs. Social work can be conceived as located at the interface between the university and the society, with a range of multifaceted connections. The interface with society occurs at a variety of levels within multiple sectors, including government organizations and community agencies. Structural and demographic changes affect all of these sectors simultaneously, thereby generating demands for previously unforeseen services (Murdock and Michael, 1996). Social work education must confront the reality of demographic changes that are producing an ageing population, changing family and household structures, and in some countries, an increasingly multicultural society (Michalski and George, 1996; Raffoul and McNeece, 1996; Wellons, 1996).

Universities have a mission to create new knowledge and to educate future citizens. Two important developments in universities in some industrialized countries include first, the emphasis on an academic model that strengthens the nexus between research and teaching; and second, the movement towards producing graduates who are better prepared to apply knowledge and skills in 'real-world' settings and thus contribute to societal production and overall welfare. In corresponding fashion, the typical mission of schools of social work is knowledge-building for social work and social welfare, as well as preparing graduates for leadership and future practice roles (Bogo et al., 1995; Williams, 1997). Meyer (1989) has identified the need for schools of social work to survive within the university context as the major reason for a shift towards an academic model of operation which emphasizes knowledge-building. Since the goal of professional social work education is primarily preparation for practice, it must provide students with the opportunity to acquire knowledge, skills, methods of intervention, ethical values and standards for professional practice. Excellence in social work education ultimately implies the ability to have an impact on the community by training high-quality social work professionals who are equipped to meet the challenges of these difficult times.

At least three perspectives are useful when examining this relationship between the social work education system, societal challenges, and the social service and health service communities. First, schools of social work are expected to provide leadership for

knowledge-building through the development and testing of innovative approaches to emerging and current societal challenges, with the objective of addressing critical practice and policy questions. Second, schools of social work have a responsibility to be responsive to the changing needs of the social service and health service communities, as well as to the realities and constraints of everyday practice. Third, given increasing competition for scarce resources, organizational survival depends upon delivering social work education that is relevant and effective (Matsuoka et al., 1993).

Educational programs need to maintain relationships with social work practitioners, students, field instructors and administrators of social agencies. These groups can contribute to the ongoing evaluation of the curriculum. This exchange also helps to maintain educators' awareness of the realities of direct practice; how social, political, and economic changes affect service delivery; and of other issues which are influencing practice (CSWE, 1994). It is often difficult for schools of social work to maintain this somewhat conflictual focus of promoting leading edge practice based on empirical research and yet being responsive to the current realities of practice.

Hartman (1990) describes the four major constituencies that shape education for social work as: the larger community or society, the academy, the profession and students. Although it has been suggested that in recent years the academy has been the most influential constituency, various authors (Globerman and Bogo, 1996; Hartman, 1990; Meyer, 1989; Rein and White, 1981) caution that the future of the profession depends on schools' abilities to provide leadership for practice effectiveness and the critical evaluation of social policy and programs, while taking into account the everyday realities of practice. This implies a school mission which strives to integrate both academic and professional imperatives and emphasizes leadership in building practice knowledge which will contribute to society's needs in general and to the needs of the social service and health fields in particular.

If educators are to meet future needs and requirements, how should these be identified? What methods are most appropriate for an environment which is affected heavily by political, economic, social and cultural factors? How should we answer questions about the main societal issues to which social work should be responding and about needed changes in curriculum, field partnerships and research?

Studying the future

There are two types of literature that can increase our understanding of how to undertake a study of the future. The first is the more general, social science futures literature, which is presented in this section. The second consists of individual studies and reports that have investigated various aspects of social work practice and education for the future, which are presented in the following section. A review of the conceptual literature identifies many different approaches and reasons for looking at the future. Coates and Jarrett (1992) note four types of 'futurists'.

1. Those developing strategies for organizations for strategic planning purposes.
2. Those creating scholarly literature for professions.
3. Those looking at the future of society.
4. Those looking for entertainment purposes.

Each of these purposes may require the use of different approaches and hence the purpose of a futures study needs to be clearly identified.

Gordon (1992) and Faherty (1997) provide an overview of qualitative and quantitative 'future' methods. Quantitative methods include scenarios, time series analysis, projections, probabilistic modelling and non-linear models. Qualitative approaches include scenario-building, Delphi techniques, interviewing, expert group meeting and genius forecasting. Gordon describes these different approaches and identifies the limitations of each. A number of these are of particular interest to the field of social work, including trend extrapolation, genius forecasting, Delphi techniques, expert group meeting and interviewing. The most common approach for predicting the future is trend extrapolation, in which people subjectively or objectively predict the future based on the directions and trends of the current system.

Coates and Jarrett (1992) indicate that the most common source of failure in forecasting is 'the mechanical extrapolation of trends' (p. 18). In discussing futures studies, they identify a number of problems that are likely to be important to the study of the future of social work and social work education. For example, there is a strong temptation to work towards consensus. They note, however, that 'consensus can be misleading, particularly when an institution, an organization, or society is in a period of rapid change and subject to new, powerful and unfamiliar forces' (p. 19).

In completing a study of the future of social work practice and education, therefore, it will be important to identify the partners likely to be involved in the process, as they will influence the methods that will be used. It will also be important to identify whether the purpose is to develop a strategy for action and change, or to participate in the production of scholarly literature for the profession.

Review of previous futures studies in social work

In an effort to identify a methodology for examining the future of social work practice and education in Canada, a critical review of previous studies and reports was undertaken to identify: the scope of the studies; goals of the studies; participants; and the methods used to gather information and to generate recommendations (Shera et al., 1997). In reviewing the literature, these factors were examined as a way of identifying issues to consider in developing a methodology suitable to the field of social work. This review was conducted using Social Science Abstracts to identify the approaches used in futures studies in social work and other fields and published studies on the future of social work. Relevant unpublished literature was found using a snowball technique. A limitation of this review is the likelihood that unpublished studies, which exist in various countries, have not been located.

Scope

The scope of the studies found in the literature was examined on a scale from 'narrow' (sub-disciplines within social work education such as field education or continuing education) through 'broad' (examining the future of social problems as well as social work), as a way of considering the context within which planning is occurring.

A high proportion of the studies and articles in the literature took a narrow or moderately narrow scope, focusing on topics such as the future of continuing education (Faherty, 1979), field education (Kimberley and Watt, 1982; Raskin, 1994; Watt and Thomlison, 1981), education for occupational social work (Hoffer, 1989) and the future of social work doctoral studies (Angus and de Jong, 1975; Gripton, 1980). Included in the definition of 'narrow' studies were individual chapters in books and reports on the future of social work, which tended to take a focused view on specific aspects of social work practice or education. For example, two

Canadian provincial studies can be contrasted with broad national studies. In Quebec, Canada, the Regroupement des Unités de Formation Universitaire en Travail Social (RUFUTS, 1993) in the report *Les Orientations de la formation du travail social au Québec*, outlined some of the key issues that will need to be addressed in defining social work education within the university context and the professional and service context. However, the primary focus of the report was on addressing the recommendations of a previous report, the Maheu Report, that suggested integrating all undergraduate social science programs, thereby eliminating the social work professional stream. Similarly, the Ontario Association of Social Workers (McCloskey et al., 1997) recently completed a study on the future of social work, but the focus group process looked primarily at the future of the profession rather than predicting the future of the social welfare field more broadly, or looking at educational changes required for the future.

A broad scope was taken in a few national studies which examined the future of social work and social work education. McKendrick (1990) looked at the future of social work in South Africa, examining the social welfare system, the social work profession and professional education for social workers. His examination critiqued the current state of social work, which in his view was dominated by attention to the white population, overloaded by heavy demand, primarily therapeutic in nature and possibly over-professionalized. This study places these issues within current South African realities and then suggests a different focus for practice, education and research, shifting the balance from therapeutic practice to community organization and development. Van Zyl (1989) also studied the future of social work in South Africa, looking at the future environment, its effect on social work practice and identification of core competencies of social workers. The findings of this study suggested a continued focus on individual practice and administration, and did not address the values of social work or its role in community development as highlighted by McKendrick (1990).

Ramachandran's (1988) study of social work in India similarly took a broad approach. It focused on the global scene of the social welfare system in India and identified a number of factors including the abject poverty and marginalization of a high proportion of the population. The study found that most interventions were primarily therapeutic in nature. The study also identified the types of interventions that would be most beneficial in the future, and the

barriers to the use of these approaches. The final component of the study considered training needed by social workers to enable them to address the needs of the poor and marginalized people of India in the future.

The Sherer et al. study (1994) of the future of social work in Israel predicts the future of Israel's society in a number of different areas ranging from immigration, the family, the Arab sector and the elderly, to the welfare state, the social work profession and social work education. The study then uses these projections as a basis for discussion of changes needed in social work roles and education.

The Task Force on Social Work Research (Austin, 1991) in the US also took a broad scope, examining the current status of research training throughout the social work profession. The task force identified critical problems at virtually every level, noting serious gaps between research and the needs of practitioners and agencies. This study also determined that current research was inadequate to meet the needs for knowledge and that education of social workers was not adequately providing an understanding of research or the development of appropriate skills.

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) has been taking a broad scope in its Millennium Project (1996). While the project outline does not provide a description of the methods used to develop future social work directions, the council members have initiated a research strategy to stimulate the exploration of 'the relationships among its structure, functions, and conceptual frameworks; [and to] create innovative forms of social work practice, theory and research; and disseminate new knowledge to inform practice and education' (CSWE, 1996).

Goals of the studies

The goals of the studies were examined on a scale ranging from 'critical analysis' (papers critically analyzing specific issues) and 'contributing to knowledge' (identification of issues through research), to the development of strategic plans and change strategies. Most of the studies contributed to knowledge about the future of social work, social work education and changes needed, but few developed strategic plans for the future or change strategies that would influence future actions of the profession, agencies or governments. None looked broadly at human resource projections and trends with the goal of influencing government policy or educational strategies, although a number examined the human resource

needs for specific groups such as doctoral students (Angus and de Jong, 1975; Gripton, 1980).

Four studies (Frumkin, 1979; McKendrick, 1990; Parsloe, 1990; RUFUTS, 1993) took a critical analysis approach which focused on identifying specific problems in social work or social work education. Frumkin (1979) focused on a human service delivery model for driving curriculum. McKendrick (1990), as previously described, analyzed the changes needed in South African social work, but the purpose was not to influence change or to develop a strategic plan. The RUFUTS study (1993) analyzed the problems in the recommendations of a previous report, but did not make new recommendations in response. It has, however, stimulated ongoing dialogue amongst practitioners and academics in the province; see for example, Levesque and Panet-Raymond (1994) and Renaud (1997).

Ramachandran's study included some limited strategies for the education of future social workers. The Ontario Association of Social Workers (McCloskey et al., 1997) developed a number of public relations strategies for working with various levels of government to maintain and improve the position of social work, but does not describe the likely future of the social welfare field within which the social work profession works. It does address the impact of cutbacks on agencies and the diminishing employment prospects of social workers. There is little discussion of educational strategies or changes required. The trends and issues manpower study of the field preparation of social workers developed recommendations for educational policy and accreditation standards in Canada (Watt and Kimberley, 1981; Kimberley and Watt, 1982).

Particularly notable is the Task Force on Social Work Research (Austin, 1991) in the US as it developed extensive change strategies for increasing the amount of social work research being conducted. These strategies include the establishment of social work research centres across the US, support to the professional and national associations of social work for the development of research capacity, and the strengthening of research in the full spectrum of social work programs. The CSWE Millennium (1996) project, although providing a sparse description of its methods, appears to be a strategy for influencing social work practice and education in the US, supporting the development of research in a range of areas of social work and social work education.

Participants

This analysis looked at the types of participants involved in the studies reviewed: how many participants were involved and were they from one area within a discipline, a broader representation within the discipline, or a broad representation from society. Again, those studies which had a narrow scope and goal of critical analysis had little participation beyond the principal author and aimed at contributing to knowledge in a single discipline. Those studies that looked more broadly at the future and changes required within the field, tended to have a greater number of participants and more widespread representation from within and outside the discipline.

As examples, the Raskin (1994) study of education and educational research priorities in field work involved 12 field work experts. The Maypole and McCullagh (1985) scenario study of the future and the Lazar et al. study (1995) of social work commitment involved only students. The more broadly focused Ramachandran study involved practitioners and academics, while the Sherer et al. (1994) study of the future of social work and social work education in Israel included a survey of all social workers as well as a Delphi process with academics, practitioners, government employees and agency administrators. Watt and Thomlison (1980) consulted multiple groups across Canada for their trends and issues in field work study, but included primarily people directly involved in field work. Austin's (1991) task force included participation from an extensive number of organizations, interest groups and social work associations, including educators and leaders from social work agencies across the country.

Methods

The methods used in these studies included 'genius visions', Delphi, consensus processes, surveys and combinations of some or all of these approaches. The critical analysis papers tended to use the genius vision approach, in which the writer, based on previous experience and research projected the direction of social work practice or education. Those papers, described previously as having a goal of contributing to knowledge, used survey, consensus or Delphi methodologies. For example, the Raskin (1994) article used a Delphi process to solicit and clarify the views of participants, while Maypole and McCullagh (1985) used a scenario survey to identify students' views on the future of the social welfare field.

The studies that had a broader scope, and those with goals closer to strategy development, tended to use multiple methodologies.

Sherer et al. (1994) used 'genius vision' papers, surveys of all social workers in the country and a Delphi process to identify the future of social work and the areas needing change. The Watt and Thomlison (1981) study of field work preparation used survey and consensus workshop approaches in developing recommendations. Ramachandran (1988) used a survey questionnaire to identify views of social work alumni on current training of social workers, and then used a second questionnaire to identify views about the future. The findings from these two questionnaires were then drafted into papers that were reviewed at a consensus workshop of over 30 people. Austin (1991) used surveys, analytical studies of previous research and consensus studies.

Conclusion

Given this brief review of the social work literature on planning for the future, a number of observations can be made. Only a few studies have been conducted in Canada and none of these are broad in scope. Those which have been done focus on specific issues such as: social work research (Gripton et al., 1993), BSW training in Quebec (RUFUTS, 1993), occupational social work (Hoffer, 1989), field education (Watt and Thomlison, 1980) and the future of the profession (McCloskey et al., 1997). More comprehensive approaches to studying the future, however, are evident in the studies conducted in India, Israel and South Africa.

It is vital that we design studies of the future that effectively document changes in social work and shape social work education. Our overall review of international experience leads to the following recommendations. Futures studies need to develop a conceptual framework that is broad in scope and can assist in understanding what is changing in the field of social work, social welfare and the sectors that influence social work. This will include understanding changing societal values, political systems, regional differences, policy shifts and funding decisions. With an understanding of projected service sector changes there is an enhanced capacity to forecast future practice and leadership roles for social workers in service delivery systems. Building on this information schools of social work can then identify the knowledge base and skills required for these future roles and the capacity needed by social work education programs to meet these new needs.

National studies that are broad in scope can achieve the goal of developing effective human resource strategies at different levels of

government and assist schools of social work in designing educational programs that prepare graduates to be competent practitioners and leaders in the field of social work. A comprehensive study of the future of social work practice and education should also provide critical information for action-oriented strategic planning.

A thorough examination of the future of social work practice and the implications for social work education in any country requires substantial funding and the meaningful participation of multiple constituencies and jurisdictions in the social work field, including governments, charitable funders, agencies, professionals, educators and students. Previous experience also suggests that the use of multiple methods of enquiry and multiple methods for the development of action plans leads to more effective outcomes. National studies of this nature are critical for the social welfare field, the profession of social work, potential students, schools of social work and future employers. Comprehensive studies of this type will also assist in securing social work's future as an important profession in this new millennium.

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