



## **Review of Social Work Education**

**Area of Inquiry 3: To what extent should social work education have a stronger focus on community development and engagement?**

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## **Context and Introduction**

There is significant and increasing emphasis on the role of the social worker in supporting community development in some of the more recent key Scottish Government policies, such as self-directed support (Rummery, Bell, Bowes, Dawson & Roberts, 2012) and social workers are expected to contribute to the overall development of strong, resilient and supportive communities, a national outcome for the Scottish Government (Scottish Government, 2016). Internationally, social workers have a much stronger community development and engagement focus than they do in Scotland (Scottish Social Services Council, 2015) and, albeit it is partly covered in some curricula, this does not feature as a significant factor in current social work education or practice (Scottish Social Services Council, 2015). Consequently, exploration is required to help frame further thinking about how and whether social work should focus more intently on community development and engagement (in education and in practice) in Scotland as a means to strengthening community capacity and supporting active and participative citizenship.

### **This study therefore explored the following questions:**

- How is community development and community engagement currently taught within social work programmes in Scotland?
- How might this be strengthened across existing programmes as a means to support implementation of current Scottish Government policies around strong, resilient and supportive communities?
- What role do social workers adopt in community development and engagement in other countries and how is this supported by their education and training?

### **Evidence sources**

- Literature Review
- Document analysis of social work programmes handbooks and/or module outlines
- Interviews with key HEI staff
- Student focus group

Interviews, consultations and information gathering with a range of employers and key stakeholders including Scottish Community Development Centre, Community Development Alliance Scotland, Crossroads Youth and Community Association, Glasgow City Council (Roma Children & Families Team), East Renfrewshire Health and Social

Care Partnership, East Ayrshire Housing & Communities (Vibrant Communities Initiative), Southern Health and Social Care Trust (Newry, Northern Ireland) and the Multi-Cultural Family Base in Edinburgh.

## **Literature Review**

In the United Kingdom the practice of community work within social work has a long and complex history (Holman, 2013). This history is documented across the literature on community social work (see for example Das et al 2015 and Forde and Lynch 2014), which identifies the major shifts in the social and political landscape that have impacted on the role and function of social work and, therefore, the application of community development and engagement practices. A focus on community work was overtaken by concerns with the efficiency and accountability that form part of the new managerialism of social work (Lymbery, 2001) that has been influenced by the rise of neoliberalism. It has been argued that “traditional” social work skills such as interpersonal communication, mediation and negotiation, as well as a focus on relationships were replaced by a focus on risk management, accountancy and budgetary skills as well as an ability to manage the tension between traditional case work and care management (Lymbery and Postle, 2010). However, there has also been increasing concern with how the *practice* of social work can be revived (Lymbery 2001). This sits alongside a growing recognition that policy developments such as personalization, the promotion of service user and carer involvement and partnership working provide an opportunity for social work to re-engage with community development work (Das et al, 2015) resulting in a resurgence of community development activities, with the UK government expressing an increase in support for community development projects and strategies, such as the Big Society and corresponding requirements for community development approaches to be reflected within the curriculum in qualifying social work programmes (Barron and Taylor, 2010; Popple 2005). This has been reflected in government policy across all four countries of the UK, which calls for a renewed focus on social work involvement in community work to develop stronger and fairer communities.

In Scotland, the current policy mandate for engagement with communities is evident across a variety of sectors. For example: the role of community development is highlighted in the *Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015* which aims to improve outcomes for communities by improving the process of community planning, ensuring that local service providers work together even more closely with communities to meet the needs of the people who use them. Of particular relevance, the Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services (Scottish Government, 2011), often referred to as the Christie Report outlines the extent to which Scotland’s public services are in need of reform in the face of a number of particular challenges. The Commission argued that a radical redesign of public services was required in order to tackle ongoing problems facing individuals and communities with a renewed focus on preventative work, something which has been missing from the crisis driven model of social work intervention in recent years. It

suggested that:

*As a whole the system is top down and unresponsive to the needs of individuals and communities. It lacks accountability and is often characterized by a short termism that makes it difficult to prioritise preventative approaches.* (Scottish Government, 2011, p.viii)

The commission emphasised the need to work with individuals and communities to better understand their needs while at the same time maximizing their skills and resources in order to promote greater self-reliance and resilience. This assets based approach is also promoted in the *Social Care (Self- Directed Support) (Scotland) Act 2013* which focuses on co-production and partnership working whereby service users are actively involved in their current and future care planning; and the *Strategic Framework for Action for Palliative and End of Life and Care (2016 – 2012)* which aims to recognise, and mobilise, the wider sources of support within community that enable people to live and die well.

Of course such strategies and policy developments can be viewed as a means to cut costs and have been criticized by authors such as Ferguson (2010) as representing “privatization by the back door”. However, he argues that within the right context they offer social workers the opportunity to return to traditional social work values and practice by placing emphasis on the importance of early intervention and preventative approaches to address those factors that place children and families at risk. This focus should recognise that strengthening communities, and the support that individuals and families receive within them, is a fundamental way of preventing harm and achieving positive change. The current political framework thus suggests a commitment to enabling community work activities to happen and, arguably, this focus should be an opportunity through which social work education and practice can firmly re-engage with community development practices.

## **Defining community development**

Before considering some examples of community development work it is important to consider definitions of community development in order to assess the extent to which a shared understanding can be reached. This review suggests that a number of working definitions are in operation across the literature. A number of terms are used ranging from “community work” to “community social work” to “community practice”, “community development” and “community engagement”. Popple (2006) has highlighted a renewed emphasis on the term “development” in these descriptions in order to emphasise the developmental nature of this work in neighbourhoods and communities. Although a shared definition and perhaps even a shared understanding of the concept is not apparent in the literature, the definition drawn on by Sharkey (2000) provided by the DHSS in 1997 seems like a useful starting point:

*Community development is directed in particular at people who feel excluded from society. It consists of a set of methods which can broaden vision and capacity for social change, and approaches, including consultation, advocacy and relationships with local groups. It is a way of working, informed by certain principles which seek to encourage communities of people who live in the same areas or who have something else in common to tackle themselves the problems which they face and identify to be important, which aim to empower them to change things by developing their own skills, knowledge and experience and also working in partnership with other groups and with statutory agencies. The way in which such changes are achieved is crucial and so both the task and the process is important (DHSS, 1995, p. 9).*

This quote appears to neatly capture the key components of community development - namely working together to achieve a common goal, while developing one's capacity in the process. The main benefits of such activities have been associated with assisting people and communities to take action that can result in greater control over decisions that affect their lives (Sender et al 2010).

There are various examples both in the UK and internationally where this has been demonstrated. In the UK, the relevance of community development work for social work practice is perhaps best documented in the field of mental health. For example, a report by Seeborn and Gilchrist (2008) highlight the benefits of a community development approach to improving 'recovery' for people experiencing mental disorder citing a number ranging from the establishment of trusting relations to facilitating economic and social inclusion and facilitating self-determination, self-help, peer support and mutual aid. They argue that one of the main developments of community development work is that it has the potential to transform those who have been traditionally excluded to participants and leaders.

## **Community Work and Social Work Education**

The contested nature of community development work is reflected in the ways and extent to which it is currently taught on qualifying social work programmes. This variation perhaps relates in part to a more general lack of agreement and understanding about the role of the social worker. Moriarty et al (2015), in a review of the literature around roles and issues within the social work profession in England draw on the work of Cree (1995:193) who suggests that "history shows that social work is always up for grabs; its task and future direction by no means certain". Further confusion arises when the distinction between social work as an activity and social work as a professional occupation are considered.

The literature suggests that education on community practice in social work can and should be included in social work teaching and that this can be achieved in a variety of ways (Barron and Taylor, 2010; Das, O'Neill and Pinkerton, 2015). There are various examples across the literature of how community work can be included within both undergraduate and postgraduate social work education. These primarily involve teaching community development as a discrete and compulsory subject (Westoby and Ingamells 2012; Forde and Lynch 2014; Dixon and Hoatson 1999), permeating other teaching around social work practice (Dixon and Hoatson 1999); as an elective (Dixon and Hoatson 1999); or as a specific practice module (Freund 2002). In some cases this teaching was reinforced and/or contributed to by community work placement opportunities (Lynch and Forde 2006; Freund 2002) and in one case was facilitated across disciplines (Westoby and Ingamells 2012).

Despite the above examples, a number of papers referred to the increasing marginalisation of community practice within social work education and called for a renewed engagement (Dixon and Hoatson 1999; Sharkey 2000; Lee et al 1996; Das et al 2015). Some of these papers were written in the late 1990's and although the extent to which such education has developed is unclear, trends influenced by neo-liberalism and the associated rise of managerialism, outlined earlier in this paper suggest that the marginalization of community development work with the social work curriculum is likely to have continued.

A number of challenges were presented in both the UK and International literature in relation to developing community work within social work education. These include: tensions between direct social work practice and community work; the shift towards generic training for social workers; lack of opportunities for placements involving community work; the fragile and diverse nature of communities, the lack of community based policies; social work educators focus and experience in clinical practice (which was related to a lack of confidence to teach community work); and student focus on developing casework skills (which were viewed as more relevant to future job opportunities). These challenges mirrored those documented in other literature. For example, research by Boehm and Cohen (2013) identified that student commitment to community practice in Israel was dependent on their self-efficacy for community practice, a positive experience within a community project during training and experience with politics. Likewise, a study by Westoby and Ingamells (2012) emphasised that staff assumptions are now at odds with many students' experience of social care. This was echoed by Forde and Lynch (2014) who found that social work practitioners experience of using community work approaches in the Republic of Ireland was often sporadic or intermittent due to competing workload pressures.

Barron and Taylor (2010) argue that despite the pressures of teaching community development within an already packed social work curriculum, social workers need to have the associated knowledge and skills for the ultimate benefit of the society and communities that they serve. Dixon and Hoatson (1999) suggest that without community work knowledge and skills social workers are less capable of doing a range of tasks related to promoting anti-oppressive practice and inclusive

societies.

They go on to identify a range of strategies to overcome some of the barriers outlined above to assist with teaching community work within social work education. These include:

- "strengthening curricula around why casework by itself has a limited change focus, and revisiting radical practice;
- opening up opportunities for post graduate teaching in community work;
- redesigning the community work subject to focus more on social action;
- building stronger links with the community work field; and linking community work theory more closely to environmental and urban theory" (p.8)

These strategies offer a way to reconceptualise teaching on community development in social work education, alongside existing models, that makes such teaching more relevant to the current climate.

## **Conclusion**

The *Changing Lives* report (Scottish Executive, 2006) set out a vision for social work that aimed to build capacity for sustainable change. Brodie and colleagues (2006) suggest that this involved 'a re-statement of the core values and skills of a generic profession, and the view that its jurisdiction should be more clearly defined and based on professional rather than organizational accountability' (p712). This is significant given the current financial climate that social services are currently operating within (Scottish Government, 2011) and the focus that social workers currently employed by local authorities' currently have on child and adult protection and commission and delivery of services. Moriarty et al (2015) argue that the activities that social workers do are strongly influenced by the expectations about their role that predominate in the countries and agencies in which they practice. Viewing and supporting people within the context of their community remains an uncontested aspect of the social work role and task (Holman, 2013), yet one of the main challenges in relation to teaching community development is the way in which it remains relevant to current social work practice. The current focus within Scottish policy provides an opportunity to meaningfully engage with communities and re-consider the role of social work beyond statutory settings. This in turn needs to be nurtured and supported by social work education.



## Findings and Discussion

The findings from this research can be organised into five distinct themes: definitions of community development and engagement; the extent to which community engagement and development currently feature in social work education curriculum; the extent to which community engagement and development currently feature in social work practice; social work students experience of community development settings; and international perspectives and models of community development and engagement.

### Definitions and understandings of community development and engagement

The phase 1 report from this review asked the question: 'should social work education have a stronger focus on community development and engagement?' The use of the phrase 'community development and engagement' raises questions with regard to shared understanding and purpose. The findings from this research would suggest that greater clarity is required as this area of work is taken forward to minimise confusion and ensure that common goals are being worked to. This centres around both a belief amongst many of the participants that community engagement and community development are discrete and distinct tasks.

Many participants commented on the fact that they felt the task of community engagement to be the more straightforward of the two, being as it is consistent with the core social work tasks of communication, partnership and relationship building more generally. This was felt to sit in contrast to the more complex and demanding task of community development. Some offered the view that community engagement is a sub-component of community development, sitting alongside the task of community capacity building. This distinction was clearly more than mere semantics around terms and language and instead connected to fundamental ideas around task and purpose. It becomes apparent that without a shared understanding and definition we run the risk of talking about the same and different things interchangeably, with the inevitable problems that will arise.

The literature review highlighted the differing definitions of community development that exist. Whilst this review highlights that a shared definition and perhaps even a shared understanding of the concept of community development is not apparent, a sense of the emphasis placed on the role of 'development' does emerge. Inherent within this is an emphasis on capacity building within communities as a vehicle for achieving change. This approach should also accommodate a social action model of community social work which affords service users the opportunity to challenge their conditions rather than accommodating them.

Whilst emphasising this lack of clarity in the use of the terms within the research, and the inherent dangers within this, many participants did express pleasure at the mere fact that the concept of community development was actually being discussed as part of the review. This was connected to a belief that whilst community development was historically linked to social work, this being best evidenced by the community development worker roles that previously existed within social work departments, a change in focus to a more managerial and procedure driven, risk assessment focussed approach to case management and an individualised perspective had resulted in community development becoming increasingly divorced from the social work task. This was in turn connected to wider political and philosophical debates around the role, purpose and function of social work more generally and for some mirrored many of the challenges, and indeed problems, that social work faced as it attempted to remain meaningful and purposeful in the role it played in supporting service users and the communities they form.

Engaging with the concept of community development and thinking about how this can and should be present in social work education for many of the research participants was a welcome sign as it reflected a desire to re-engage with this way of thinking and practice more systematically. It also reflected some of the positive examples of work which they were either part of or aware of, emphasising the need for social workers to be comfortable with and conversant with the skills and tasks involved in community development work.

#### Community engagement and development in social work education curriculum

The research brief, stemming from the work in phase 1 of the review, stated that community development and engagement does not feature as a significant factor in current social work education. The research sought to explore this perception and establish if this was indeed felt to be the case.

Feedback was gathered from HEI's, concentrating on how and where the subjects of community development and engagement featured in social work programmes. Notwithstanding the issues of definition highlighted in the section above, the findings do not necessarily support the previously held belief that these themes did not feature strongly in current social work curricula. What was revealed was that:

- The themes of community engagement and development were represented to some degree in all social work programmes
- Programmes differed with regards to the centrality and significance which was placed on this
- The manner in which students experience this material differs from programme to programme – in some instances this will entail discrete stand-alone modules firmly focussed on community development and/or engagement whilst in others it takes a more integrated approach with material spread across and

underpinning modules throughout the programme.

The immediate conclusion to be drawn is that all programmes felt that the topic was represented in their curriculum to some degree. Whilst this varied from programme to programme it does challenge the belief that community development and engagement does not feature as a significant factor in current social work education.

This appears connected to the issue of definitions, particularly around the area of community engagement. Several programmes reported that the task of getting to know, building relationships with and engaging with communities of varying types formed a key and consistent element of their course. Whilst many would concur that these should indeed be core elements of the social work task, a relevant question exists around whether this definition of and approach to community engagement is consistent with a more structured and formalised approach to community development. It serves to illustrate that the definitions of both community development and community engagement adopted influence significantly the way in which this question is answered.

Several programmes appeared to encourage students to explore the concept of community engagement, and in particular community development, more systematically by the delivery of stand-alone modules. Several of these involved students being linked to organisations and/or service users, spending time in communities and developing a deeper understanding of community resources, needs and aspirations and how this all links to the social work task. In one programme such a module was purposefully located at the very start of year 1 in order to communicate a clear message about the principles and values which underpin the approach to social work taken throughout the programme.

However, whilst modules such as these were felt to be both innovative and extremely beneficial for students there was an acknowledgement that they are both extremely resource intensive and reliant on significant agency and service user co-operation for effective delivery. As such they are subject to many of the same demands that practice learning currently experiences and in certain situations, circumstances out with the control of the university has resulted in planned for activities not being delivered, either at all or in the envisaged manner. This serves to underline the reciprocal nature of the relationships that require to be developed between universities and agencies/communities in the provision of such learning experiences for students.

A recent development in Northern Ireland has seen the decision to explore the creation of a post qualifying qualification in community development. This follows the undertaking of research amongst more than 100 social work managers and training unit staff. The consensus amongst respondents was that such a development was desirable as it would support social workers in the tasks of contributing to person centred services, developing partnership arrangements with services users and communities, and articulating the role of social work in

improving/safeguarding the wellbeing of individuals, families and communities (O'Brien, 2015).

### The relationship between community development and social work practice

Linked to the earlier discussion around definitions and understandings of community development, it is important to consider what social work training brings to community development and what community development gives to social work students. Discussions with participants suggested that these can be seen to include:

- Alternative ways of thinking and working; a corrective to individualistic and pathological perspectives; the possibility of a broader approach for students likely to enter local authority social work practice
- Exposure to and greater understanding of political processes and local government
- Exposure to the democratic ethos in practice and comparatively unstructured organisations
- Direct experience of the process of local action and of working with residents; interaction between local groups and power structures
- Private troubles/public issues as an overarching construct, within which a range of issues including stigma, discrimination, impact of poverty and disadvantage can be explored
- Experiencing service user's perspective of the world including the social pressures and conflicts.

Exposure to community development approaches can ensure that social work students are offered a more radical approach including the opportunity for empowering people to take direct action to change their circumstances, rather than to adapt to an existing paradigm. Radical social work approaches fit appropriately within a community development framework.

It can be argued that there is a clear role for social workers to be involved in preventative work and community planning issues alongside radical social work approaches, to change situations rather than cope with them. If taking this approach; then different explanations of poverty, disadvantage and the impact of social economic and political forces should form the core of the theoretical framework within which social work students should study.

Knowledge required for a community development approach should include insights and experience of working with groups, the processes of local government and a clear appreciation and understanding of the consumer view of public and social services.

It is useful in this context therefore to consider how social work sees itself as contributing to society. Is it simply a safety net or should it be something more? This relates to a consideration of what sort of society we should be trying to create for people as social workers. From a

community development perspective this should be focused on empowering individuals to affect their own change locally. Empowering people to participate in community action changes people and can empower them to change their own life through this individual and collective process. By taking a more collective view of society, as opposed to the targeting on individual attributes that create stigma and discrimination, (e.g. disability, poverty), disadvantage can be challenged. This process can lead to the creation of fairer and more equal communities.

There are links to co-productive approaches in that community development approaches includes challenging the expert, demands power sharing and acknowledges that the service user is an expert in their own life (Scottish Community Development Centre, 2016). Evidence from both the literature and feedback from participants suggests that the skills required for community development methods and approaches can be seen to include organisational skills; use of initiative; engagement; developing working relationships with colleagues and local people; fact finding; and political skills. Values required include seeing social problems in a wider political and economic context; value of collective approaches; and ethical issues.

When we look further afield we can see that similar issues appear to exist elsewhere. In countries such as the Czech Republic, Sweden, Hungary and the Ukraine, community work is included as a strand of theory and practice within the education and training of social workers. However, as in Scotland, many challenges exist. There is both variance around the extent to which it is actually represented on social work programmes as well as limits on the degree to which social workers can practice in this way when in employment.

#### Community engagement and development in social work practice

The research brief stated that community development and engagement does not feature as a significant factor in current social work practice. The scale and scope of this research have not allowed this notion to be tested and explored in a systematic way. For this assertion to be tested more fully it would be required to canvas both employers and practicing social workers much more systematically.

The picture that has emerged from this somewhat limited initial exploration is mixed. Some examples highlight specific settings and/or organisations where there is very significant focus on community development and/or engagement. A particularly positive example of this includes the innovative work of the Roma Children and Families Team undertaken by Glasgow City Council (Moore-Milne, 2016) in tackling issues of housing, health, education and employment. A community development approach has been adopted, working in a preventative way to support families and avoid the need for statutory measures. A range of projects have been set-up and different funding sources secured. These different strands of work have been brought together in a Local Action Plan.

Other examples where models of practice were being introduced which reflected a distinct community engagement and community development focus included East Renfrewshire Health and Social Care Partnership, East Ayrshire Housing & Communities (Vibrant Communities Initiative), Southern Health and Social Care Trust (Newry, Northern Ireland) and the Multi-Cultural Family Base in Edinburgh.

However, the extent to which these are the norm was felt to vary and several participants expressed the view that much of the work carried out in statutory settings will not have this same focus. This then creates a challenge for the experiences of students on social work placements and the degree to which they are exposed to this way of thinking and working.

#### Social work students experience of community development settings

The majority of participants expressed the belief that there were few practice learning opportunities available for students which had either a direct focus on community engagement and community development. This was felt by many to be unfortunate as the afore mentioned skills associated with community development – organisational skills; use of initiative; engagement; developing working relationships with colleagues and local people; fact finding; political skills – are vital and relevant for social work students regardless of where they end up gaining employment upon qualification.

In addition to this some questions were raised about the extent to which all social work students thrive in a community development focussed placement. Several participants reflected upon how in their experience some students do very well whilst others struggle to make the connections between their placement role and statutory or 'traditional' social work.

This raises a number of interesting questions. Whilst some difficulties experienced by students in community development focussed placements will be associated with the individual students, and as such some of these difficulties may have been replicated regardless of where they were placed, there was a belief that the more 'able' students often 'get it' and do well in these settings. An obvious question from this concerns the complexity of the task – do the more 'able' students tend to do better in these settings because they can cope with a higher degree of complexity and challenge? Alternatively – is the mismatch that is experienced by some students a reflection of the fact that their social work programme, prior to placement, has not prepared them as well as it might for the work and tasks associated with a community development focussed placement?

Feedback from social work students regarding the perceived validity of different sorts of placements is relevant here also. Many students report a sense that those that have completed placements in statutory settings are at an advantage come the point of recruitment. Given that many of

the community development focussed placements that do exist are located in the voluntary and third sector this does appear likely to create issues with regards to how these placements may be viewed by students, especially as we enter a phase where it appears likely that the supply of newly qualified social workers is likely to outstrip demand.

Alongside this however it may be argued that we sit on the brink of a fundamental change in the way social work practice is both conceptualised and structured as the changes which will be associated with the integration agenda take hold. This in turn will create the possibility for a range of different practice learning experiences to be developed where students are supported to develop both a mind-set which recognises the worth of community engagement and community development and the practical skills to implement them. The challenge for universities will be to ensure that their programmes reflect these developments and support and prepare students for this task. The challenge for employers will be to ensure that new graduates with skills in community engagement and community development are both recognised in the recruitment and selection process and, perhaps more crucially, employed in roles which are not so constrained that they find themselves unable to operate in a manner where their learning can be translated into practice.

## **Conclusions**

From the participants in this small consultation there was a firm belief that the skills of community engagement and community development were of strong value to social workers. As such it was felt important that they be adequately represented on social work education curriculum. The challenge of achieving this was widely viewed as achievable, indeed feedback from different universities reflected that some felt this to be the case already.

What was likely to pose more of a challenge was ensuring that this be maintained and reflected in both practice learning opportunities made available to social work students and then subsequent employment for newly qualified social workers.

Whilst it can be strongly argued that community development should be an intrinsic part of social work there would be a need to strengthen the emphasis placed on this area of activity. At the present time pressures within the social work, health and social care systems mean that the emphasis is often on reaction rather than prevention. This coupled with unprecedented budget constraints create concern that many social workers, especially those within the statutory system, do not have the capacity or time to do more than they are doing already.

## **Key questions for future consideration**

To what extent are social workers able to engage in community development as part of their role?

Are upcoming developments around integration likely to impact significantly upon the way in which social work practice is carried out, lending more of a community engagement and community development focus?

How much value do employers place on the skills of community development and community engagement, particularly at the point of recruitment and selection of newly qualified social workers?

How do Universities best ensure a community engagement and community development focus is represented in their taught curriculum and complimented by a range of practice learning experiences that are suitably linked and supported?

Is there merit in exploring further the example of the development of a post-qualifying programme in community development being pursued in Northern Ireland?

Is it the role of universities to set an agenda which prioritises community engagement and community development, developing graduates where this is more recognised and valued?



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