

SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN CANADA: INCHING TOWARD THE PROGRESSIVE¹

EDUCACIÓN PARA EL TRABAJO SOCIAL EN EL CANADÁ: PASO A PASO HACIA UNA FILOSOFÍA PROGRESISTA

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ABSTRACT

The history of social work education in Canada can be characterized as a debate about the mission of social work practice between two perspectives: the “professional” (or function) and the “progressive” (or cause) one. This paper briefly outlines the history of social work education in Canada, describes the current delivery structure of social work education, and summarizes the responsibilities of the various standard-setting bodies. It then discusses the issues identified through a recent planning process in the context of the larger debate about the mission of social work.

RESUMEN

La historia del trabajo social en el Canadá puede caracterizarse como un debate entre dos perspectivas, una que da énfasis a la función del trabajo social y otra que se enfoca mas en las razones de su existencia. Este artículo ofrece una sinopsis de la historia de la educación del trabajo social en el Canadá, describe la presente estructura y las responsabilidades de los diferentes cuerpos que establecen los estándares corrientes. Finalmente, describe puntos de debate identificados a través de un proceso de planeamiento en el contexto de una amplia

KEYWORDS: Canada, Bachelor of social work, Graduate education, Social service diploma, Standard setting bodies, Diversity.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Educación para el trabajo social, Canadá, Ciclo básico en trabajo social, Educación al nivel de grado, Diploma en servicios sociales, estándares en Canadá, Grupos étnicos y minoritarios.

The history of social work education in Canada, not unlike that of most Western countries, can be characterized as a debate about the mission of social work practice between two perspectives: the “professional” (or function) perspective and the “progressive” (or cause) one (Wagner, 1986). Supporters of professionalism favour protecting people

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using social work services by ensuring that social workers have well-developed skills, work within a value system that emphasizes respect and dignity of the individual, and are informed by current human development knowledge and what are known to be effective interventions (Shetty, 1996; Brawley, 1974/75). Progressive social workers believe that the role of social workers is to serve as advocates for greater social justice (Vaillancourt 1996; Carniol, 1984; 1990). The purpose of social work education for supporters of this perspective is to ensure that students understand the structural factors that contribute to oppression of marginalized groups like the poor, people with disabilities, people who are not racially or ethnically part of the dominant culture within Canadian society — whether newcomers, Aboriginal, women, religious minorities, or people who are minority in their sexual orientation. It also means that they believe social workers must be trained in advocacy skills, and work from a critical perspective.

While this debate is woven into every discussion of social work education in some fashion, the most recent, in-depth exploration of these issues in Canada was a “Sector Study” of social work” (Stephenson, Rondeau, Michaud, & Fiddler, 2001). This study looked at social, economic and political changes informing social work practice. It looked at who worked within the broader social service sector, where they worked, and the expected demand for social workers with various educational levels. The study also examined the needs for training as perceived by recent graduates of social work programs, by consumers of service, employers and social work educators. The project was a collaboration among the professional social work association (Canadian Association of Social Workers - CASW), the social work educator’s association (Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work - CASSW) and social work education managers (Canadian Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work – CADDSSW). The report included parallel sections for Quebec, for Aboriginal people and for the rest of Canada and concluded with a common strategic plan that recommended five directions and nineteen objectives for the three organizations to pursue.

In the paper that follows, I will first outline a brief history of social work education in Canada, describe the current delivery structure of social work education, summarize the responsibilities of the various standard setting bodies, and then discuss the issues identified through this planning process in the context of the larger debate about the mission of social work.

CONTEXT AND BRIEF HISTORY OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN CANADA

Following contact with Europeans, Canada was first a French and then a British colony. Today, Canada is a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system that was founded in 1867. It is now a country of almost 32 million people (Statistics Canada, 2004). In addition to its indigenous peoples, Canadians have emigrated from almost every country in the world. Canada is divided into ten provinces and three territories, and covers the second largest landmass of any country in the world. Church and State are separate, and the dominant culture had become increasingly secular, with only a third of Canadians now attending religious services regularly (Couto, 2001). French and English are recognized as official languages by the federal, and some provincial governments, and Canada was the first country to pass a Multiculturalism Act in 1985, which is intended to foster awareness of and respect for the many cultures of its citizens. Canadian social policies have tended to be less generous than those of the Scandinavian countries, but more generous than

those of our nearest neighbour, the United States (Lightman, 2003).

The first schools of social work were founded in 1914 at the University of Toronto and 1918 at McGill University in Montreal, during a period of rapid industrialization and urbanization and high levels of immigration in Canada (Moffatt, 2001). They were grounded in a belief that social problems like inadequate housing, poverty, and child protection could best be addressed by people with well developed social work practice skills and knowledge of applied social science (Wills, 1995), a belief that seems to fit most closely with the professional perspective. While many of the original social workers were motivated by Christian values, either Protestant or Catholic, the grounding of social work education in the social sciences has contributed to the secularization of the profession, which draws women (about 85%) and men motivated to “help” those with economic, personal or mental health issues.

STRUCTURE OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Social work education is offered at the postsecondary level in Canada, which means after completion of 9 years of elementary school and 4 years of secondary school. Community colleges (or CEGEPs in Quebec) offer diplomas for social service workers and more specialized diplomas in areas like gerontology or child and youth services. Universities offer degrees at three levels: the Bachelor of Social Work/Social Services (BSW or BSS), the Master of Social Work/Social Services (MSW or MSS) and the PhD. They may also offer post-degree diplomas in specialized areas like administration or evaluation research. There are now approximately 50 social service worker programs across Canada in community colleges or GECEP, and 34 university programs that graduate people with either a BSW (31), MSW (23) or PhD (8) (Stephenson et al., 2001). The purpose and structure of each of these programs will be described briefly below.

SOCIAL SERVICE WORKER DIPLOMA

The social service worker diploma statement of purpose recognizes the need for balance between the professional and the progressive visions of social work education:

It is not seen as being sufficient for graduates to possess only highly developed relationship skills, thorough technical knowledge and understanding of the rules governing their particular area, and heightened awareness of how society functions. It is expected that graduates also possess a commitment to work for social justice. The attainment of these skills, attitudes and knowledge is enhanced by the fact that the Social Services Worker Program has allowed graduates to build on their prerequisite experience with the field, and their emotional and social maturity. (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1996, p. 5)

The program of study at the college level is usually 2 years, and applicants may be admitted with a high school diploma, though some have a bachelor's degree before completing this diploma. In addition to classroom courses in intervention skills, students take liberal arts courses like human growth and development, writing skills, computer literacy, or sociology. Field work, also known as a practicum, is required in the program as well.

Educational policy is a responsibility of provincial governments according to the Canadian constitution, which means that one of the challenges in any area of education is ensuring similar standards from province to province. There is no national body accrediting the social service worker diploma, so the number of practice and liberal arts courses and

how many hours of practicum are required in programs across the country varies. The guidelines in the province of Ontario Social Services Program Standards suggest 546 hours of practicum over two years, and that seventeen of twenty-three courses are social work courses such as principles of counselling or interviewing for human services rather than liberal arts courses (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1996). There are over 4500 graduates of these programs annually, and they are likely to work in services like emergency shelters, group homes for youth, home care for elderly or disabled people, or substance abuse programs, usually under the supervision of social workers or health care professionals. They make up about 35% of the social work sector; that is, those practitioners categorized as social workers; managers in social community and correctional services; family, marriage and other related counsellors; probation officers; and community and social service workers when census data are analysed (Stephenson et al, 2001).

BACHELOR OF SOCIAL WORK/ SOCIAL SERVICES

Admission to a Bachelor of Social Work program can follow immediately after graduation from secondary school (direct entry), can follow completion of one or more years of a liberal arts degree (partial degree), or can follow completion of a bachelor's degree (post-degree), most commonly in a discipline like sociology or psychology. CASSW accreditation standards require that the practicum at this level be a minimum of 700 hours, and that a minimum of 50% of degree credits be in social work courses, and a minimum of 40% be in liberal arts courses (CASSW, 2003). Courses taken would typically be similar to those at the community college level, but would place more emphasis on critical analysis and theory. Graduates from the BSW program are most likely to work in child protection and health services. The BSW is the most common social work degree, held by about half of people who identify as social workers on the national census, and 35 percent of those working in the social work sector more broadly. A total of 2,025 BSW/BSS degrees were awarded in 1996 (Stephenson et al, 2001).

Master of Social Work/Social Services

Admission to a Master of Social Work program follows completion of either a BSW/BSS degree or other bachelor's degree. If the applicant holds a BSW/BSS, they are admitted to a one-year MSW program; if they hold some other bachelor's degree, they are admitted to a two-year program. For students admitted with a BSW, CASSW accreditation standards require that there be either a practicum of 450 hours or a thesis for this degree, and that there be 18 credits in social work courses (CASSW, 2003). Three credits are given for a course that meets 36 hours. Courses taken would typically include advanced clinical social work practice, evaluation of practice, and social policy analysis. Graduates of MSW programs are more likely to have supervisory or management responsibilities than graduates of BSW programs, as well as to work with more complex treatment issues like women or children who have experienced physical or sexual violence, or people diagnosed with serious mental illnesses. About 20% of those identifying as social workers on the 1996 census have an MSW, and about 12% of the broader social work sector. A total of 705 MSW/MSS degrees were awarded in 1996 (Stephenson et al, 2001).

PHD IN SOCIAL WORK

The PhD in social work is now a requirement to teach in most schools of social work

in Canada. Until 1987, there was only one school in English Canada (Toronto) and one in French Canada (Laval) that offered a doctoral degree in social work. These two schools graduated about ten doctoral students a year, insufficient to meet the increased demand for faculty with the growing number of schools of social work. Between 1987 and 2001, six additional schools added doctoral programs. While these schools now have the capacity to graduate enough PhDs to replace retiring faculty or to fill new positions, schools in remote areas continue to have difficulty attracting people with the doctorate. Doctoral programs are usually looking for applicants with at least three years of practice experience after the MSW degree. These mature students often have family responsibilities that tend to keep them near the more major urban area where they have studied (Westhues, 1988). Attracting people from diverse backgrounds to doctoral studies also continues to be a challenge.

The primary purpose of the doctoral degree is to prepare graduates to carry out research. Some programs also require learning about educational theory, how to design courses, and ensure that students have the opportunity to gain experience teaching before they graduate because most graduates will be employed as professors at the university level. Typical courses in a doctoral program would be research methods, statistics, qualitative data analysis, and epistemology. Some programs require courses in an area of practice, but others allow additional courses to be taken that will prepare the student to carry out the research for their dissertation. There are now about 20 PhD graduates a year in social work.

STANDARD SETTING BODIES: ETHICS, CODES OF PRACTICE AND ACCREDITATION

The Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) was founded in 1926 (Foley, 2002). Nine provincial and one territorial association are affiliated with the national association. CASW's mission statement reflects a commitment to both the professional and the progressive perspectives: "...to provide a national leadership role in strengthening and advancing the social work profession in Canada. CASW promotes social justice and well-being for all Canadian residents" (CASW, 2004). The Association's objects include providing national leadership to promote activities aimed at strengthening and unifying the social work profession across Canada; providing support to member organizations; serving as a source of information and consultation on social work practice; encouraging and assisting in the development of high professional standards; engaging in advocacy on social policy issues; undertaking specialized studies relevant to social work; dissemination of information; and to represent Canadian social workers internationally. In support of the professional side of their mandate, the CASW has developed a Code of Ethics that serves as the foundation to the Standards of Practice developed in each province to ensure that the public is protected from unethical or incompetent practice (CASW, 2004; Antle, 2002). Provincial associations have assumed responsibility for developing Standards of Practice that build upon this Code of Ethics, specifying the knowledge, values and skills required to practice within the Code of Ethics. These Standards of Practice provide the framework for regulating the profession and are described in more detail in Collins, Coleman and Miller (2002).

One of the issues that continue to be debated in Canada is whether it is a conflict for the same organization to have responsibility for both promotion of the profession and

for protection of the public from incompetent or unethical social work practice. In three of the ten provinces (British Columbia, Ontario and Prince Edward Island) the current decision is to separate these functions, and independent organizations have been created to regulate the profession (Foley, 2002). The regulatory body ensures protection of title in all provinces – only people who are members may call themselves social workers – and hears complaints that are registered about violations of the Standards of Practice (Collins et al., 2002). The regulatory body typically consists of members of the general public, as well as members of the profession.

Accreditation of social work education programs at the BSW/BSS and MSW/MSS levels is the responsibility of the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work (CASSW) (Foley, 2002). Membership may be institutional - schools of social work offering a BSW/BSS or MSW/MSS degree - or individual. All 34 Schools now offering university level degrees in social work are members. Faculty, professional staff, students and alumni of social work programs are eligible for individual membership and about three hundred subscribe each year. Volunteer members of the Board of Accreditation review programs for accreditation on a seven-year cycle. Created in 1970, the Board of Accreditation was understood to have multiple purposes: “protection of the public, support and improvement of standards of social work education, the provision of a basis for professional associations’ recognition of educational programmes and the facilitation of student transfer between programmes” (CASSW, 1971). Officially, the Board of Accreditation is “composed of a maximum of 15 members appointed by the Board of Directors from among social work educators, students and practitioners or such other persons who, by reason of their interests and experience, can assist in maintaining the quality of education for the profession of social work” (CASSW website, 2004), though in recent years all but one member has been a social work educator.

RECURRING ISSUES

As noted above, the issues that were identified in *In Critical Demand* (Stephenson et al, 2001) were not a surprise. They have been debated with greater or lesser intensity for the past century. These discussions have been conducted in our national journal (Canadian Social Work Review, previously Canadian Journal of Social Work Education), in presentations at annual conferences of the CASSW and CASW, in deciding what should be approved in Standards for Accreditation, and within every school of social work as part of their review of curriculum. Some of the discussions have been in collaboration with members of the professional association, but most often they have been parallel processes, with any bridging between social work educators and professional associations the work of individuals who have chosen to be active in both organizations, not at the institutional level. An overview of the issues shaping the ongoing regulatory and educational debate is outlined below, organized under five headings: preparation for practice; educating for diversity; social policy and advocacy within the curriculum; relationship with the profession and standard setting; and readiness for the demands of the workplace.

PREPARATION FOR PRACTICE

The area that has drawn the greatest attention in answering the question of what is our mission as social work educators is discussion of *what content should be covered in the social*

work curriculum. This is an ongoing debate not only because of ideological differences but also because of the demographic, social and political changes that unfold over time. We have asked ourselves if our emphasis in the classroom should be on theory, on practice skills, or the integration of the two (Barnes, 1985; Coates, 1991). We have searched for a meta-theory to organize our curricula that would adequately reflect the values that we believe are foundational to social work education. Perspectives explored at different times have included systems (Drover & Shragge, 1977; Goldstein, 1975; Grosser, 1975), structural (Moreau, 1979; Mullaly, 1997), critical (Carniol, 1979), postmodern (Leonard, 1994), anti-oppressive (Campbell, 2002; 2003), feminist, (Wehbi, 1999), Aboriginal (Saulis, 2003), and social ecology theory (Ungar, 2003).

With regard to *substantive content*, we have debated whether social work programs should prepare graduates to practice in a specific area like child welfare or whether that is the responsibility of employers (Armitage, Callahan, & Lewis, 2001; Stephenson et al, 2001). Arguments in favour of expanding substantive content to more explicitly recognize marginalized groups are common in Canadian social work literature and will be elaborated in the next section. We have struggled with the place of research in the curriculum at both the bachelor's and master's levels; whether we should teach qualitative, quantitative or mixed method perspectives and which kinds of knowledge should be received as legitimate (Graham & Al-Krenawi, 2000; Gripton, & Irving, 1996; Parent, & Saint-Jacques, 1999; Westhues, Cadell, Karabanow, Maxwell, & Sanchez, 1999).

The field placement has been another focus for considerable reflection. We have asked who should be responsible for supervising and assessing the work in the field – university-based instructors, or field based instructors (Rachlis, 1988; Rogers & McDonald, 1989), and how we are to ensure that each student finishes with the same basic skill set and has a quality experience in the field (Bogo, & Davin, 1989; Bogo, & Vayda, 1989)? We have also struggled with how to ensure that a critical perspective informs the use of these skills (Rossiter, 1995). In addition, the accreditation standards (CASSW, 2003) show that we have been concerned about how many hours are required for a practicum at the bachelor's and master's levels, whether it is acceptable for a master's level student to complete the degree without a practicum, and what training should be offered for field instructors.

Another issue that has surfaced from time to time is whether to promote a specialist or generalist orientation to practice (Cossom, 1988; Lehmann & Coady, 1999). The current accreditation standards (CASSW, 2003) identify the bachelor's level as a generalist degree and the master's as a specialist degree, but at least one school has now declared their master's program to be preparation for advanced specialist practice (School of Social Work, University of Windsor, 2004). A related issue is whether the bachelor's or master's degree will be considered the qualifying degree for membership in the professional association. While the master's degree was initially required for recognition as a professional social worker in Canada, the bachelor's degree was embraced more readily than in the U.S. in the 1970's and accepted for registration in professional associations. This issue is under consideration once again, and Quebec has recently announced that, in recognition of the increased complexity of the issues that clinical social workers encounter routinely, the master's degree will be required for membership in their professional association in 2005. This decision was influenced by the fact that most other allied health professions now require a master's degree for professional membership, and the Quebec decision is certain

to lead to discussion of this matter in other provinces.

One of the recommendations of the Sector Study was the need to link curriculum more closely with areas of increased demand for social work service. Areas identified were: "geriatric services, health care services, services to Aboriginal people, services to youth and their families, services to the mentally ill, needs of the homeless, services to immigrants, refugees and ethno-cultural communities, services to gay and lesbian people, employability and management skills, technology use, self-care, advocacy and anti-oppression and cultural sensitivity" (Stephenson et al., 2001, p. 206). Whether schools of social work should modify their curricula in response to identified needs of employers was contested in some of the Roundtables that were organized to discuss the directions and objectives recommended in the study. Those most identified with a progressive perspective argued that our job is to teach how to resist the oppressive structures in work places rather than to better prepare graduates to meet the needs of these workplaces. Child welfare agencies, with their large workloads, and an increasing emphasis on social control were cited as an example of where such resistance was warranted (Roundtable Summary Report, 2001).

The accreditation standards have grown from four to twenty-six pages since they first were approved in 1971 (CASSW, 1971; 2003). They reflect the current consensus among social work educators on the guidelines for the content that should be covered in social work curricula. The Canadian standards are understood to be a framework that gives shape to the curriculum, but allows members of each School to exercise their creativity. They are deliberately less prescriptive than the American standards, but an ongoing tension exists between maintaining room for discretion on how a School shapes its mission and curriculum, and movement toward greater prescription.

EDUCATING FOR DIVERSITY

The Sector Study chose to identify issues related to diversity as a separate direction rather than as part of the above direction to emphasize their importance for social work education (Stephenson et al, 2001, p. 211). As noted in the introduction, Canada is a diverse country, and as a result of changes in immigration policy has become much more so in the past twenty-five years. This direction speaks to the need to increase enrolment of Aboriginal and more recent ethno-cultural communities; to recruit faculty from diverse backgrounds; and to ensure that faculty have experience in working cross-culturally and can teach reflectively from this experience. To support these goals, CASSW committed to the Anti-Racist Training and Education Materials Project. This project not only made materials for classroom use readily accessible, but also provided training for faculty in how to handle the critical incidents that can arise in the classroom when issues related to difference and to power differences between groups, are raised in class. Current accreditation standards reflect this commitment to educating for diversity (CASSW, 2003, 5.8 and 5.9).

The commitment of many Canadian social work educator/scholars to raising awareness of the experiences of people in the full spectrum of marginalized groups is evident when perusing the Canadian Social Work Review. Issues pertaining to gender in relation to social work practice have received the fullest discussion (Bains, 1996; Baker, 1990; Ferguson, 1988; Groulx, 1985; Krane, 1990; Legault & Pâquet-Deehy, 1985; Lundy, Davies, Homes & Urquhart, 1996; Profitt, 1994; Richard, 1988; Rinfret-Raynor, Pâquet-Deehy, Larouche & Cantin, 1992; Russell, 1989; Wehbi, 1999). This is followed by attention to what has been

called cultural competency, cultural sensitivity, or anti-racist practice (Bernard & Thomas, 1991; Gibbs, 1996; Jacob, 1985; Lam, 1998; Matsuo & Sorenson, 1991; Morneau, 1999; Naidoo & Edwards, 1991; O'Neill & Yelaja, 1991; Pon, 2000; Rambally, 1995; Roy, 1991; Saldov, 1991; Seebaran & McNiven, 1979; Schwager, Mawhiney & Lewko, 1991; Tsang & George, 1998. More recently, articles have begun to appear on sexual orientation (Daley, 1998; O'Neill, 1995; Swan, 2002) and Aboriginal issues (Bruyere, 1998; Hudson & Taylor-Henley, 1995; McKenzie & Mitchinson, 1989; Morrisette, McKenzie & Morrisette, 1993; Nelson, Kelley, & McPherson, 1985; Pace & Smith, 1990; Tester, 1994; Timpson, 1990). The experiences of older adults have received less attention (Aronson, 1992; Bérubé, 1989; Neysmith & Marcus, 1979; Paquet, 1995; Warner, 1989) and articles pertaining to people who have disabilities are largely absent from the journal, though a special workshop on disability issues was offered at the annual conference in 2004.

SOCIAL POLICY AND ADVOCACY

Both the professional associations and social work educators engage in advocacy through research and social action. The extent to which this is seen as a priority and the resources allocated to the work has varied over the years, and from School to School. The Sector Study reaffirmed as a core responsibility of social work to "raise public awareness of social and economic inequities and to increase the capacity of consumers to speak for themselves" (Stephenson et al, 2001, p. 210). Concern was also raised at the 2001 Canadian Social Welfare Policy Conference about a waning commitment to social policy in social work education, and in particular about how adequately graduates of schools of social work in Canada are being prepared to take on their responsibility to advocate for social justice through policy reform. This concern has surfaced previously in discussions about social work curricula (Baker, 1977; Rose, 1975; Yelaja, 1975).

To address this concern the Social Policy Committee was mandated by the board of the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work in June 2001 to identify ways to inquire into the state of social policy in the social work curriculum. The Committee began with a review of course outlines from across the country and discovered that there is a great deal of variability in the course objectives from one school to the next. This led us to ask whether it would be possible to develop prototype course outlines for introductory, advanced and field specific social policy courses that could be used by social policy instructors across Canada, or whether social policy is so province specific that this would be hegemonic.

We found ourselves asking whether it would be possible to reach agreement on common course objectives; on the number of credits within a BSW or MSW program that should address social policy content; whether we could recommend readings to address the course objectives; and whether we could suggest possible assignments that would facilitate not only learning social policy content and process, but educating graduates of schools of social work about their responsibility to engage in social policy advocacy. We questioned whether social policy should be taught in separate courses, integrated into practice courses, or some combination of these two approaches. We also found ourselves asking how to make these recommendations as suggested guidelines rather than as prescriptions for action. These deliberations have fostered the development of a network of policy teachers in schools of social work and the results of their deliberations were presented to the annual

conference in 2004.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PROFESSION AND STANDARD SETTING

One of the accreditation standards requires that the schools of social work “establish and maintain collaborative relationships with the professionals and professional associations relevant to its programme, particularly the professional social work association” (CASSW, 2003, SB/SM2.14). While most schools have active and constructive working relationships with the professional associations relevant to their programs, it would be fair to characterize the relationship at the association level between CASW and CASSW, and between schools and their provincial professional associations as ambivalent. Faculty members who identify as more “progressive” see professional associations as turf protecting organizations that do not offer meaningful protection to the public from incompetent or unethical social work practice (Carniol, 1990; Globerman, 1992; Lundy, 2004). Further, there is fear that professional associations will attempt to prescribe what is to be taught in schools of social work through the development of competencies that must be demonstrated for admission to the professional associations and will be more focused upon skills-development than critical analysis (Rossiter, 2002). Licensing exams like those required in most states in the U.S. for entry into the profession and requirements for ongoing continuing education are mechanisms by which this control may be exercised over the curriculum (Collins et al, 2002). Consumer influence on curriculum development, by contrast, is seen as desirable (Dominelli, 1996; Beresford, 2001).

The accreditation standards demonstrate a balance between the “progressive” and the “professional” stands once again, requiring participation of “stakeholders” in policy formulation, program development and program evaluation” (SB2.12). Stakeholders involved in accreditation tend to include students, alumni, and community agencies – especially those serving marginalized groups - the professional association, staff, faculty, and senior administrators. Supporters of collaboration with professional associations point out that many employers require membership in the regulatory body as a condition of employment, suggesting that it is reasonable that educators work with these bodies to ensure that graduates are able to meet regulatory requirements, not only on admission to the profession but throughout their career.

Reflection on these concerns, particularly since the completion of the Sector Study, has lead to an understanding that there are different motivations for assessing “competence”, and that “competence” may be assessed as a screening mechanism at the point of entry into the labour force and/or profession but also on an ongoing basis. Furthermore, while it can be accepted that there are foundational social work skills and knowledge, there are also population specific and organization specific skills and knowledge that require assessment as well. The question is whether the various assessors should collaborate, or whether they should be at arms length from one another, in a “checks and balances” system? Should the Board of Accreditation continue to understand part of its purpose to be “protection of the public”, and “the provision of a basis for professional associations’ recognition of educational programmes” as defined in 1971, or should it focus more narrowly on “support and improvement of standards of social work education” and “facilitation of student transfer between programmes”? Finally, do employers have a responsibility for training employees and providing work environments that permit social workers to practice

in accordance with their Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice?

In recent years, the question of how to assess “competence” and who will be privileged to assess it has been hotly debated in Canada and elsewhere. There is fear that defining competencies puts one on a path to deskilling the profession (Harrison, 1992; Dominelli, 1996) and will inevitably lead to a level of prescription about practice that is almost impossible to achieve, and ultimately deskills the profession (Stephenson et al, 2001). Of particular concern is the devaluing of critical analysis, and the removal of judgment from decision-making processes (Dominelli, 1996; Rossiter, 2002). The CASSW passed a motion at the 2001 Annual General Meeting declaring that their accreditation process should be the basis for assessing the competence of social workers. This assertion supports the argument that if students graduate from an accredited program they have the values, skills and knowledge required to practice social work ethically and competently. It may also reinforce the power of social work educators in shaping the educational experience of social work students, particularly if they are not engaged in a meaningful consultative process with students, employers and the professional association in the development of their curricula.

The regulatory bodies in all provinces have accepted the argument that a graduate of an accredited program has the competence to practice in an “entry level social work position” with the BSW/BSS (CASSW, 2003, SB5.3) or for “advanced, specialized or supervisory roles” with the MSW/MSS degree (CASSW, 2003, SM5.2) as the basis for eligibility for membership in the regulatory association. Nine professional associations require the BSW/BSS as a minimum for membership and one, Quebec, now requires the MSW/MSS. Nova Scotia requires two years of supervised practice before granting full registration and New Brunswick may require an exam in addition (Collins et al, 2002). The Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers has recently decided to require an exam for registration as well. Three provinces also regulate social service workers/social service technicians – Ontario, Quebec and Alberta (Collins et al, 2002).

READINESS FOR THE DEMANDS OF THE WORKPLACE

The final direction identified in the Sector Study is recognition of the need for “more formal mechanisms to training and workplace supports that would significantly improve the overall working conditions for the sector” (Stephenson et al, 2001, p. 209). Objectives included better equipping social workers for self-care; improved peer support and supervision; changes in workplace policies, practices and conditions that would attract and retain social workers, improved workload, salaries and benefits; and promotion of labour mobility from one area of the country to another. While some attention has been paid to these issues by Canadian social work scholars recently (Baines et al., 2002; Harvey, Mandell, Stalker & Frensch, 2003; Kenyon, 1997; Regehr, Leslie, Howe, & Chau, 2000; Stalker, Mandell, Frensch & Harvey, 2003), little attention has been paid to these issues in social work curricula over the years. These issues have generally been understood to be within the purview of the professional associations and unions, and this understanding was reinforced in the Sector Study, with leadership for all actions except increased curriculum content on self-care being assigned to professional bodies (Stephenson et al., 2001, 209). An innovative program promoting mentoring of new graduates by the Ontario Association of Social Workers is one of the responses to this direction, as well as their creation of a

Salary and Working Conditions Advisory Group.

CONCLUSION

One of the collective strengths of social work educators in Canada is a commitment to both social justice and to graduating students who can demonstrate competence as skilled practitioners. A further strength is our engagement in open dialogue about how these commitments translate into curriculum, and a capacity to respect different answers to this question. Nowhere is the effect of this critical reflection more evident than in the changes to our accreditation standards over the years. A comparison of the 1971 standards with those of 2003 shows that the Canadian schools have moved from formulating the purpose of social work education as fostering “an identification with professional social work and a commitment to learning, scientific enquiry, and ethical responsibility” (CASSW, 1971, 2.5) to a more critically reflective: “The curriculum shall reflect social work values that promote a professional commitment: a) to optimize the dignity and potential of all people; b) to analyze and eradicate oppressive social conditions; c) to develop self-awareness which includes an understanding of the effects of one’s ethnic, cultural and racial background on client-worker relationships; d) to promote equal access to resources, services and opportunities for the accomplishment of life tasks; and e) to promote the alleviation of distress, and the realization of aspirations and values in relation to oneself and others.” (CASSW, 2003, 5.8).

We have inched our way toward the incorporation of more progressive values into our education system over the past thirty years. The dialogue that has supported this shift is codified in the decisions made about the standards that are used for accreditation. Requirements that Aboriginal (5.9.13) or Francophone (5.9.14) issues be addressed, or that students have knowledge of other related occupations and professions (5.9.12) have nudged schools to include content in their curriculum that otherwise might not have been considered a priority. While there is still variation in the mission statements, the course descriptions and the course content offered from one school to the next, the question has recently been posed about whether we now have too much regulation of content, and perhaps too much uniformity in what is being offered. And so the dialogue continues.

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