
Introduction to the baby and the bathwater

Sarah Fraser

Sarah Fraser, President ANZASW 1986-1988. NMIT, School of Social Sciences.

Fulcher, L. (1988). Putting the baby back with the bathwater: Rethinking the practice curriculum in social work education. *New Zealand Social Work Journal*, 12(3 and 4), pp. 4-9.

1988 – The year our Olympians won all their gold medals sitting down. Dave Dobbyn won album of the year for *'Loyal'* and Cyclone Bola ravaged the East Coast. David Lange was Prime Minister of the Labour Government with Roger Douglas as his Finance Minister. The Royal Commission on Social Policy released its report following one of the most extensive public consultation processes ever seen in this country. The State Sector Act reforming the public sector was passed. The Gibbs Report on health and the Picot Report on education were released, paving the way for massive reforms in both areas. Waitangi Day celebrations at Waitangi were suspended because of continuing protest action and Bastion Point was returned to Ngati Whatua.

Leon Fulcher was Professor of Social Work at Victoria University in 1988 when he wrote the article reprinted here. In it he examines the place of the practice curriculum (also known as fieldwork education) in the wider context of professional education for social workers. Many of the issues he raised then remain highly relevant 21 years later. Social workers continue to practise today in challenging contexts with the most vulnerable groups in our society. Increasing consumer awareness and requirements for public accountability place greater demands on our educational institutions to adequately prepare new social workers for these contexts. Fulcher argued in 1988 that acquiring knowledge of the world and developing analytical skills through formal learning were fundamental to this preparation. However he argued that the transfer of new knowledge and skills into action through fieldwork experience was of even greater importance. His article laid down a challenge for future social work educators to make the practice curriculum their primary focus of attention.

How is that challenge being responded to in the 21st century?

Currently the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Work Educators is lobbying strongly at a range of political levels for funding increases for fieldwork education. Fieldwork coordinators from around the country meet annually as a sub group of ANZASWE to share their skills and experiences to improve the delivery of this vital aspect of social work education for all students.

At a very rough estimate there will be over a thousand social work students on placement in each year throughout the country. In the 20 years since Fulcher wrote his article that would mean there have been at least 20,000 student placements offered. Fieldwork educators are a crucial and integral part of the professional social work education team. Many practitioners

today will remember the inspiration they were given by those who mentored, challenged and supported them as social work students venturing out into practice for the first time.

Fulcher's article has been chosen for inclusion in this retrospective journal not only to revitalise debate and discussion about the place of the practice curriculum in social work education but also to acknowledge and celebrate the work of past and present fieldwork educators across Aotearoa New Zealand.

Putting the baby back in the bathwater: Re-thinking the practice curriculum in social work education

Leon C Fulcher

*Leon Fulcher is the former Director of Social Work Education at the University of Stirling in Scotland where he began his teaching career as a Lecturer in Social Work in 1975. He has practised and supervised staff in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. His research in the fields of social work and group care has maintained an international perspective, focusing on services and educational programmes in the United Kingdom, Western Europe, Israel, North America and Australasia. He is co-editor of *Group Care for Children: Concept and Issues* and *Group Care Practice with Children*, both published by Tavistock. He is currently Professor of Social Work at Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand. This paper was presented at the twentieth national conference of the Australian Association of Social Workers, 1987.*

Introduction

The demands on professional education are many if social workers are to respond effectively to the tasks expected of them in a rapidly changing society. While supervised practice has been a feature of social work education for many years, its place in the overall curriculum has become increasingly compromised. Many educational institutions have imposed constraints on the scheduling of placements by timetabling classes in such a way as to ensure that supervised practice can only be obtained during holiday periods outside the normal academic year. Traditional academic interests have tended to dictate the content of assessment so that theoretical learning has been emphasised at the expense of applied learning. Methods of assessment have tended to focus on essay construction and periodic examinations, with practice studies often being seen as a soft option. Finally, limited attention has been given to the development of practice teaching with the result that placement supervision is obtained from anyone with qualifications and experience, regardless of practice teaching ability.

It is little wonder then that, on completion of qualifying education, many intending social workers are ill-equipped to deal with the day-to-day demands of professional practice. Such