Diverse pipers, discordant tunes? Delivering robust social work education in an environment of new legislation and competing influences

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Introduction

'From street to street he piped advancing
And step for step they followed dancing' (Browning, 2006).

This position paper uses the poem *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* as a metaphor to describe the relationship between the world of social work education and those that seek to influence it. Various pipers and their tunes are identified and their impact on social work education analysed. The paper will consider a possible response to dealing with these diverse and discordant tunes.

The Social Workers Registration Act (2003) (the Act) is a seminal piece of legislation in the fields of social work education and practice. This piece of legislation stands alongside a range of other influences that directly impact on the education of social workers and it is timely to ask questions about which piper or pipers are calling the tunes in the world of social work education. There are a number of competing pipers and the Act is a significant one. It would be unfair to lay all social work education requirements upon the Act as before its introduction educators had a range of influences of a less formal nature. The impact of the Act has been to shift the tensions between the already existing influences. Lesley Pitt (2005) suggests that the Registration Board appears to be reinforcing 'traditional positivist ideas about what is acceptable knowledge' (Pitt, 2005, p42) and in so doing it seems to be creating a 'degree/non degree binary opposite' (ibid, p42). There are complex and multilayered issues which impact on social work education and there is still room for strong debate.

The Act defines the tunes that social work educators are morally and ethically obliged to consider in the delivery and development of their programmes. It would be counter productive to allow the requirements of legislation to solely dictate the tune educators dance to, rather, educators must continually reflect on and ensure a balance is maintained in what is delivered in social work education.

Clients

Clients, whether they are individuals, families, or communities are the focus of social work practice. They are also pipers in the world of social work education, albeit the strength of their tune in academic corridors may be weak. Clients' most obvious involvement is possibly in the case studies written by others about them and also their involvement with students on placement. A broad spectrum of social work theories, from task-centered practice (Coulshed & Orme, 2006) to structural analysis in community development work (Munford & Walsh-Tapiata, 2001), emphasise the notion of working *with* clients rather than *for* them. Waterson & Morris (2005) discuss the involvement of users of social services and the contribution they can make. They assert that having users involved in a range of areas would add value to the education of social work students. Waterson & Morris (2005, p655) suggest including service users not only in 'the delivery of teaching within and outside the classroom, but also student selection, assessment and curriculum development'. The involvement of the users will both contribute to, and challenge, the education process: for it to have value and integrity the active involvement of users is vital. Currently in mental health services consumer advocates are an integral part of service delivery. The next step would seem to be the consumer directly influencing social work education.

Clients' perspectives will be affected by their own experience of social workers and the type of social work they have received in relation to their own situation. Developing this notion further, Waterson & Morris (2005, p654) discuss 'the importance of service users' own 'knowledge's, theories and models developed from their own experience, which may well be at variance with those held by professionals.' Clients will hold a range of perspectives on what the usefulness or otherwise of social work education might be and what skills, values and personal attributes are important in a social worker.

Scheyett & Diehl (2004, pp.447-448) discuss the concept of 'Consumer-partnered education'. They suggest that there has not yet been the research to ensure that social work education would be more effective with increased involvement by consumers. However, there is the potential for this to become a 'long-range goal' and that the research itself should be consumer-partnered.

The tunes of this group of pipers should perhaps be the loudest. The *Global Standards for the Education and Training of the Social Work Profession* document (2004, p4) summarises this succinctly when it asserts that programmes should respect, 'the rights and interests of service users and their participation in all aspects of delivery of programmes'.

Agencies

Agencies that employ social workers have an influence upon social work education. They may be an integral role in the education process by providing placement positions. In the struggle to find placements it may be perceived that all social work agencies are significant pipers.

Government agencies in the field of health and welfare, which employ social workers, tend to be pipers with tunes that are resoundingly clear. They have structures and systems, which enable them to have a significant collective voice and allow them to connect with

other government institutions, for example, tertiary education providers. The social work skills and personal attributes required by the government agencies are articulated to groups like the Association of Social Work Educators. The standards set down by the government of the day become the benchmark and by their very nature these set standards might be more intransigent than those experienced in non-government agencies.

Non-government agencies are wide ranging in relation to both ideology and tasks undertaken in the social work field. These agencies tend to be on a continuum where some are heavily funded from government sources while others receive little or no funding. Those agencies that are largely government funded usually work tightly within the expectations and contractual arrangements they have with the state which audits them and provides funds in relation to predetermined output classes. If a non-government agency is heavily government funded, challenging the status quo will be difficult. It could be seen as tantamount to 'biting the hand that feeds them'.

Those agencies receiving minimal or no government funding may have the freedom to engage in social or political action, and challenge barriers, for example, those created by the benefit structure. They are then able to more readily and openly facilitate the inclusion of marginalised groups of people.

The tunes of these independent agencies may be somewhat different to the tunes of other agencies, in particular government agencies, but this lack of harmony has the potential to be a contribution to the social work education process. Students will have the opportunity to challenge and be challenged in relation to skills, values and personal qualifications. The essential nature of these agencies sets up opportunities for the critical examination of values.

Matthews & Gasson (2002), in describing social work in a community setting, talk about the political element and accepting funding that is diametrically opposed to the values of the agency. Those agencies that are not dependent on funding from sources that conflict with their ethos tend to more readily challenge the structures and the systems that are oppressive.

These pipers are definitely pipers with tunes to be heard and their practice will tend to be cognisant with a number of the core purposes of social work education as indicated in the *Global Standards for the Education and Training of the Social Work Profession* (2004). Engaging in respectful dialogue with such agencies and allowing their values and ethos, skills and experiences to impact and permeate social work education will assist in providing a cutting edge in the learning environment.

Social workers

Practising social workers also have an influence on social work education. Social workers were once students themselves. They will be affected by their own study, where they studied, who taught them, their placement experiences as well as their own values, personal life experiences and background.

The tune these practitioners play in relation to social work education appears to be more of a whisper rather than a shout. It is difficult to hear, and to assimilate into social work

education, challenges and contributions of the social workers. Social workers in the field may be used as guest lecturers and form part of assessment panels, bringing with them their personal as well as their agency perspective.

Social workers have a key role in every social work agency and are at the core of every social work interaction. Integrating their voice into social work education is essential. 'Practice wisdom' is a term used in relation to social work. This concept is, to some extent, captured in Gregory & Holloway's (2005, p621) discussion about experiential and reflective learning. Gregory and Holloway referring to the work of Schön (1983, 1987) suggest that, 'Learning occurs when the experience is reflected upon and generalisations are made from the reflections. These generalisations are tested out in further experience, leading to modified practice intervention.' This process contributes to the skill of critical thinking and reflection in action. Social work practitioners are able to facilitate these types of learning opportunities for students. Brookfield, (1987) suggests that the following are key components of critical thinking:

• identifying and challenging assumptions,
• recognising the importance of context,
• imagining and exploring solutions,
• developing reflective criticism.

It is in the field that students are really able to embark fully on the journey of developing 'practice wisdom'.

The contributions of those that are prepared to observe, be observed, critically reflect on their own practice, provide constructive critical comment and be involved in reflective dialogue with students are key pipers in the field of social work education. Social workers' responsibilities and the pressures of day-to-day practice will potentially influence the level of their involvement in social work education and its development.

Students

Students are also pipers. There are policies and procedures that are in place to capture some of their tunes. Perhaps the policies and procedures are not always effective; however there are usually opportunities for them to speak, for example, through evaluation processes.

Students bring their own set of values and challenges to the system. Their individual tunes will be diverse and working with these has the potential to develop breadth and depth in the education arena. Feit (2003) explores a definition of social work practice and attempts to reframe what he terms the 'dichotomy' (2003, p357). He suggests that social work can be considered as 'an occupational continuum' (ibid, p361). Feit (2003) also saliently refers to the complexity of social work practice and the range of tasks involved (ibid, p357). With this in mind, it is pertinent for social work graduates to emulate the level of diversity there is in the client group and to have the associated breadth of skills and personal attributes required to undertake the complex range of tasks.

Some students may struggle in key areas of social work education; for example, social policy; understanding and applying reflectively the theories that underpin social work

practice. Addressing this struggle becomes a challenge for social work educators. The importance of social work educators adopting '…multiple methods of enquiry, … offering students sufficient opportunity to reflect on their values and goals' is discussed by Chan and Ng (2004, p315). A range of strategies employed in delivering coherent and relevant social work education is important. Concomitant with this is the demand for social work educators to be critically reflective about their own practice so that difficult material is not simply diluted.

Some students are proactively influential, both individually and collectively. Their tune is dominant and in the education arena this is undoubtedly highly appropriate. However, for many the focus may be on the repayment of a student loan or supporting a family, tempering the will and opportunity to devote time and energy to changing and influencing social work education.

Resources in the education environment

Financial consideration is a dominant theme in the field of social work education and is a tune social work educators would probably like to muffle when it begins to play! Resourcing has implications for staffing, and practice opportunities. Facilitating small workshops, laboratories, and clinical practice, establishing placements and providing appropriate supervision with tight budgets is an ongoing challenge.

There are places to fill so that degrees and diplomas are financially viable. Frequently there is pressure to work with high numbers in classes and accept students where, under other circumstances, it may be suggested they complete a pre-entry course. Students may have criminal convictions that conflict with the requirements of the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) and the Social Workers Registration Act (2003). There will be particularly strong pressure where tertiary providers have open entry. Preston-Shoot (2004) critiques some of the pressures on tertiary educational institutions. He states that, '… social work lecturers, in conjunction with employers, clients and carers, must ensure that candidates meet the required standards at entry and that students have achieved the outcomes required at assessment points' (2004, p609). He also makes the point that social work education is resource intensive but that it does not attract extra funding as do some other disciplines. Although Preston-Shoot (2004) is writing within an English setting his comments are nevertheless relevant to the Aotearoa New Zealand context.

The pressure from this area may result in environments that are not conducive to establishing an education process that encourages reflexive practice and active student participation in learning. The Social Workers Registration Board (2005) has clear expectations, for example 120 days practicum (2005, p5), however resourcing does not reflect the time commitment and therefore educators have to shuffle limited resources to meet competing demands.

The Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers

ANZASW is another piper. At times their tune is barely discernible amongst the other tunes however their competency process links into the registration process and therefore the influence of the ANZASW has been both embraced and strengthened by the Social Workers Registration Board. The Code of Ethics (1993) and the Ten Practice Standards (1997) are core to social work

practice and in this sense ANZASW has a pivotal role in the area of social work education. The practice standards potentially, and no doubt in reality often do, form an integral part of the social work programme. Equally the Practice Standards (1997) and Code of Ethics (1993) apply to the educators themselves particularly when they are members of ANZASW.

There are ethical dilemmas and conflicts in tertiary institutions that cut across the Code of Ethics. The standards are clear and educators have the opportunity to deal with them in a manner that provides positive role modeling for students. For example, Standard 4 of the Practice Standards (1997, n.p.), states that, 'The social worker acts to secure the client's participation in the working relationship.' and working within this premise is a challenge for educators who hold the power to pass or fail students.

Social work educators

Social work educators are pipers who both influence and are influenced by all the tunes being played. They are the coordinators and facilitators of social work education with all the various influences impacting upon it. As with social workers and students, social work educators bring with them their own experiences in relation to education, social work practice, their strengths and struggles. The social work educator may be described as the conductor who attempts to harmonise all the tunes in an orchestra whilst imparting their own melody.

Perhaps one useful guideline to consider is the *Global Standards for the Education and Training of the Social Work Profession* (2004) as an outline of the core purposes of the social work profession. These core purposes form the basis of the standards for the education and training of the social work profession. The standards and guidelines are wide ranging and provide a useful base from which to consider the whole area of social work education. These guidelines also embrace the ANZASW Practice Standards (1997) as well as the Aotearoa Code of Ethics (1993).

Social Workers Registration Act (2003)

The Act is a relatively new tune. Tertiary institutions are upgrading their diplomas to degrees to ensure they meet the requirements of the Social Workers Registration Board. Their tune is a strong one for social work educators. As the Board develops its policy statements and determines the meaning of phrases like 'competent to work with Maori' and 'competent to work with other cultures', its level of influence increases.

Social work education programmes will, of necessity, incorporate and integrate the new policies that are being developed by the Board. They follow the Board's lead and dance to the legislative requirements. Graduates expect their qualification to be acceptable to both the Board and employers. Employers will no doubt increasingly require social workers to be registered, especially those providers that are state institutions or who are largely funded by government.

With the impact of registration comes the potential for a two-tier system to develop. The influence of registration in the area of salary scales is, as yet, largely unknown. However, it appears that there are, and will continue to be, agencies able and willing to pay for registered social workers and there will be agencies who are not in this position.

The Government in setting registration as the benchmark will impact on those agencies who have employed, for many years, practitioners without the required academic qualifications. In discussing the New Zealand experience of indigenous social work Walsh-Tapiata (2004) states that:

> With the introduction of the Social Workers Registration Act (2003) in Aotearoa New Zealand it is going to be an interesting time ahead for Maori social workers who have worked much of their lives in their communities but who are most likely to not have a qualification. This will be a real challenge for those who are implementing this legislation as there has been general recognition in our country of the tangata whenua and the need for the inclusion of the Treaty of Waitangi as a principle that should underpin active social work practice (Walsh-Tapiata, 2004, p36).

This could mean members of already disadvantaged groups, who have received little or no formal education, are further disadvantaged by the registration requirements. Registration requirements may lead to social workers who are members of minority cultures and disadvantaged groups, such as Maori, becoming further disenfranchised if they are unable to complete the requirements for registration. They may have years of experience but the lack of formal qualifications may result in the social workers being perceived as inadequate practitioners which creates even further disparity.

Conclusion

The pipers in social work education do not play individual tunes. Their tunes overlap, compete and are oftentimes at variance with one another. To deliver dynamic relevant education involves reflecting upon what will guide the decision-making process of social work educators as they wrestle with these competing tunes.

There are a number of influences impacting upon social work educators and when these are examined there is the opportunity to mirror the day-to-day challenges social work practitioners face in their interactions with the myriad of people they work with. The challenges are varied and each one brings its own specific dilemmas. If educators overlook the influences and challenges they are in danger of losing the cutting edge of social work education. Educators who follow one particular piper's tune will limit the possibility of openly considering and putting into practice the *Global Standards for the Education and Training of the Social Work Profession* (2004).

The Social Workers Registration Board, in accordance with the Act has introduced new principles and regulations and potentially added further distance between educators, the professional association, agencies, practitioners, service users and social work students. It is incumbent on the Registration Board and educators to ensure that all the pipers play their part in harmonising the education tune. The extent to which each of the stakeholders is willing, and able, to grapple with the shifting tensions will be reflected in the extent to which programmes with substantial depth and breadth are cultivated.

Discordant tunes keep educators asking questions, holding the tension, finding the balance, challenging the systems and playing new and exciting tunes. At times the different tunes conflict resoundingly while at other times they blend melodiously. Social work educators have the potential and capacity to creatively engage with the discordant tunes, to ensure

that social work education, not only meets the requirements of legislation, but also makes a significant contribution to enabling students to become reflective critical practitioners.

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