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Education for the crossroads? A short history of social work education in Scotland

Abstract

This paper provides a short history of social work education in Scotland. Its aim is to understand the patterns of the present through the lens of the past. A key argument is that social work education and practice exists persistently in the crossroads, that is, in the spaces between competing and often conflicting perspectives regarding that ‘what’, ‘why’, ‘how’ and ‘who’ of social work and social change. At the same time, there is a dearth of robust theory and research underpinning social work education and practice, leaving the profession vulnerable in periods of rapid social and political change. Attention is given to the implications of these constants for education and practice, and to how we might address these going forward. The paper concludes that if we wish to realise the potential of social work education, learning and practice, we need to more collectively address long-neglected questions of learning identity, learning philosophy and learning practice.

Key words: social work, education, professional learning, practice, philosophy, pedagogy

Word count: 4492

Introduction

Social work education occupies a tentative place in the profession and the academy. On the one hand, there is relatively little writing, research and/or theorising of social work education (Lishman, 2012); it is not, it appears, the most worthy of subjects. On the other, social work education, in the UK at least, has been subject to sustained political, and increasingly professional, scrutiny and is regularly criticised for perceived shortcomings within the profession and practice (McCulloch and Taylor, 2018).

In this paper I provide a historical reading of social work education in Scotland. The aim is to understand the patterns of the present through the lens of the past. A key argument is that social work education, like social work, exists persistently in the crossroads, that is, in the spaces between competing and often conflicting perspectives and ideologies regarding that ‘what’, ‘why’, ‘how’ and ‘who’ of social work and social change. At the same time, there is a dearth of theory and research underpinning social work education and practice, often leaving the profession vulnerable in periods of rapid social, political and professional change. Attention is given to the implications of these constants for education and practice, and to how we might address these challenges going forward. The paper concludes that if we wish to realise the potential of social work education, learning and practice, which need to be understood as thoroughly interdependent entities, we need to more collectively address long-neglected questions of learning identity, learning philosophy and learning practice. These ideas and precepts need to be stimulated in education and embodied in practice.

Beginnings

Social work education bears the hallmarks of its past. Its foundations can be traced to concerns about the plight and problems of the urban poor and, at the same time, a growing demand for middle-class women to play a useful part in life outside of the drawing room. For simplicity, I will describe this development in terms of the story of three London-based organisations, each of which brought its own ambition, ideology and approach to these issues, and each of which initiated education for those delivering its services. It needs to be understood, however, that similar ideas and initiative were taking place in cities across the UK, and importantly, in Scotland.

In 1865, Octavia Hill opened her first housing association in Marylebone in London; by 1874, she had 15 housing schemes with around 3000 tenants, each of whom was visited on a weekly basis by one of her unpaid 'housing workers'. Hill quickly grasped the need to train these visitors, so she set up a lecture series for them. Around the same time, in 1869, the Charity Organisation Society (COS) began in London, driven by the ideological conviction that almsgiving was misguided and that what was needed was a systematic and 'scientific approach' to the distribution of charity and welfare. Within two years of its inception, the COS set up a committee for the training of the caseworkers whose job it was to carry out the investigations that determined who should receive help, and of what kind. A few years later, in 1884, the first university settlement was established in the east end of London. Its approach was very different to that of the individual 'casework' model of housing associations and the COS. It pioneered community development, with the idea that settlement volunteers and local residents should come together and share their knowledge and skills (Bamford, 2015). Again, education was seen

as fundamental to achieving these ends, and classes in social study began early in the 1890s initiated by the warden of the Women's University Settlement in Blackfriars, building on a format of the housing association lectures. By 1897, a joint committee consisting of representatives of the Settlement, the COS and the National Union of Women Workers came together to offer training. This committee became the London School of Sociology and Economics in 1901 and the school began teaching for the first time in the autumn of 1902. Parallel developments followed in other parts of the UK, as settlements houses were established, for example, in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee (Bruce, 2012). Again, as pioneers of social service and social reform, the Scottish settlements quickly identified a need for professional training and, working with the COS and others, early Scottish-based social work courses were developed from within or alongside local settlement houses, each of which operated with close ties to the local universities.

The broad function, form and features of early social work education courses were remarkably similar to those in operation today. Then, as now, the primary function of early courses was to 'equip' social work practitioners (Jones, 1976). The content and form of courses was thus largely determined by the practical concerns of the social work enterprise, a feature which continues to this day. Most early courses followed the pattern of a two-year diploma, integrated academic and 'district'-based learning methods, and followed a combined curricula spanning social theory and administration, sociology and practical instruction (Cree, 2017).

Notwithstanding, social work education's practical 'lean' arose from and sat alongside a broader scholarly pursuit to better understand the nature and cause of individual and social problems, as well as effective mechanisms for their remedy. The interdependence of these two functions remains critical.

Review, regulation and governance

Mechanisms of review and regulation are a recurring theme in the story of social work education, prompted variously by attempts to improve or correct educational practice and/or the broader organisation and practice of social work itself. The first review of social work education was conducted in 1914 by Elizabeth Macadam. Macadam foregrounded the ‘vague and elastic’ nature of social work activity, its appropriate focus on ‘the improvement of social conditions’, and the need for greater interagency co-operation. She made a case for the education of social workers within universities, though retaining a focus on practical and district based methods, while also highlighting the importance of schools of social science functioning as ‘centres of social study for the general public’ (1914, 11). Macadam concluded by emphasising the importance of cultivating a commitment to lifelong learning, an open mind and an adaptability for change.

Further reviews followed in 1947 and in 1959, reflecting common and disparate themes (Younghusband, 1947, 1959). For example, where Macadam argued for university-based education, by 1959, Younghusband (responding to the low take-up of university courses), proposed a three tier approach, resulting in the development and delivery of social work courses through further education colleges. Younghusband also called for the establishment of a UK-wide council for the education and training of social workers, to be responsible for the promotion and regulation of social work courses. Around the same time, Professor Barbara Wootton (1959) published a searing critique of social work, and of the casework relationship in particular,

challenging practice and education to abandon its psychological leanings and recover social work's identity and capacity for practical help.

By the 1970s, review and recommendation gave way to a new era of regulation and requirements following the establishment of a UK-wide Central Council for Education and Training for Social Work (CCETSW). In 1973, CCETSW issued its first 'statement on requirements' for generic social work courses, with subsequent statements, rules and requirements issued in 1985, 1987, 1989, 1990, 1991 and 1995. The rise of regulation in UK social work education reflected broader, and initially optimistic, public sector shifts towards: more centralised mechanisms of governance, the post Kilbrandon/Seebohm re-organisation of social services into large and powerful local authority departments - which now needed to be staffed with suitably trained social workers, and an increasing attention to professional education and training as a mechanism for social reform (Cannan, 1994). By 1989, however, the tide had turned. In the wake of a series of high profile child tragedies and inquiries, related political and public critiques of social work, and broader political, social and economic shifts in the form of globalisation, the rise of the market and social fragmentation (Dominelli, 1996), CCETSW published its 'Rules and Requirements for the Diploma in Social Work: paper 30' (CCETSW, 1989). Paper 30 launched a new single qualification in social work which, for the first time, prescribed the particular knowledge, skills and values required for 'competent' social work practice. Though welcomed by some, for many, the introduction of a competence-based approach to social work education and practice enacted a paradigmatic shift from education to training, a shifting of power from academics and practitioners to government and employers, and the rise of a technocratic approach to learning and practice (see Dominelli, 1997). Within three years, the DipSW was under review again, and by 1995, a revised DipSW was issued presenting a new set of

competences to be met by qualifying students. The new DipSW also set out to promote wider and more flexible routes to social work education and training, igniting old-new debates regarding the role of the academy and practice in professional learning.

Notwithstanding the significance of the 1990s developments on the shifting shape and function of social work education in Scotland and the UK, within only a few years, social work education was again under review, now under the ‘modernising’ agenda of a New Labour government. Conducted this time by external consultancy firm JM Consulting (1999), in some respects, the review retraced familiar territory. However, addressing the criticisms of social work education, the report identified a need to look beyond education programmes, underscoring the need for ‘action on a broader range of issues’ (para 2.12). Key recommendations included: the need for an extended programme of study, a clear framework of professional standards and ethics - extending beyond competencies to also incorporate ‘the critical thinking, analytical and interpersonal attributes normally associated with professionalism’, mechanisms for the induction and support of newly qualified workers and ongoing professional development, and an improved framework for research and evidence based practice (para 3.4a, para 3.9). This broader vision and outlook accords with recent recommendations for social work education in Scotland and, at the time, provided a refreshed direction for social work education in Scotland and the UK.

The above mapping of the development of social work education in Scotland and the UK tells the story of an endeavour persistently shaped by, and subject to, the shifting winds of political, economic and social change. It underscores that social work education serves a profession whose identity, purpose and politics is, and has always been, politically and publicly contested. The challenge for social work education is not to attempt to resolve these tensions for the profession. Rather, it is to educate, equip and empower the profession to function usefully within

these. But how best to do that? We return to this question below. For now, let us consider more recent developments.

Social work education today

In 1998, Scotland achieved devolution, marking, as Mooney and Scott (2016) observe, the beginning of a transforming period in Scottish politics and policy making. Shortly afterwards, the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) was established via the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act 2001. The SSSC was established with a remit to protect people who use services, raise standards of practice and strengthen and support the professionalism of the workforce, which included responsibility for promoting and regulating social work education. The impact of these newly-devolved systems of governance enabled, for the first time, the development of a distinctly Scottish approach to social work education.

In a climate of renewed political ambition and public service resourcing, in 2003, the Scottish Executive, along with the other UK governments, announced its intention to introduce a new Honours' degree level social work qualification, which became in 2004 the minimum professional qualification. In the same year, the Scottish Executive (2003) published *The Framework for Social Work Education in Scotland*, setting out the expectations of the new degree, the requirements that programme providers must meet and the professional standards to be achieved by graduates. 2003 also saw the launch of the Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education (SISWE), a partnership-initiative between the then nine Scottish university providers, co-funded by government 'to ensure social workers are trained to meet the

21st century demands of their profession'. These were, again, optimistic times; the new degree set out to strengthen social work's professional identity and standing and appeared to recognise, at least in its rhetoric, the importance and complexity of doing so. The accompanying framework and standards underscored the necessary integration of academic and practice knowledge and skill, the necessity of critical, reflective and analytic practice, and the importance of ethical and moral reasoning in the 'often fiercely debated' environs of practice (Scottish Executive, 2003:19). Thus the new degree continued broader UK drives for modernisation and improvement across social services while committing to doing so via an integrated, critical and value-led approach to education and learning.

In the intervening period, locally and globally, the political, economic, social and professional landscape framing social services and social work education continues to transform. Globally, the continued dominance of the market, the economic crisis and the rise of austerity politics have significantly altered the environment and resources within which social services and social work education now operate. Nationally, the rise of a Scottish National Party government, and its promise of a distinctive and progressive Scottish politics, has seen a renewed rhetoric of 'progressive' welfare services, reflecting, as Mooney and Scott (2016) observe, a broader politics of national autonomy and nation building. At the same time, changing social demographics in the form of an ageing population, increased diversity and widening social inequalities have created new levels of service demand and expectation which now jostle for priority amidst old-new challenges. At a professional level, social workers in Scotland find themselves grappling with all of the above and more, whilst being submerged into new and transforming structures of health and social care. Faced with the above, attention inevitably turns again to the question of whether social work education in Scotland remains 'fit for purpose' (Grant *et al.*, 2016). As Cannan

(1994, 5) observes, that education systems should become a particular target in seasons of politically driven reform should not surprise: 'for it is seen both as the site of 'old' attitudes and as the locus for the inculcation of the new'.

Against the above backdrop, in 2014 the SSSC announced an intention 'to develop a new and different approach to professional learning', triggering the latest in a long line of reviews of social work education. In 2015, amidst questions regarding the evidence base driving change, the need for 'a new approach' was reframed as a 'review' of social work education and located within a broader vision and strategy for social services in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2015).

Broadly, the most recent review of social work education concluded that social work education in Scotland remains 'fit for purpose' but is facing significant challenges, similar to those facing the profession as a whole (SSSC, 2015, 2016). Accordingly, the review identified a number of areas for collaborative enquiry and evidence, spanning pre and post-qualifying learning, which it was hoped would mobilise investment and action from across the profession. Relatedly, the Review concluded that social work education and professional learning needs to be conceptualised and advanced as a shared endeavour, requiring strategic, sustained and joined up contributions from academic, practice and other actors across the social work career path (Scottish Social Services Council, 2015, 2016). Though a shared approach has long been written into Scottish social work education and learning, the review found that sustained rationalisations across practice and the academy, alongside competing professional priorities, were resulting in partnership-light models of learning, to the detriment of learning and practice outcomes (Kettle *et al.*, 2016).

Examined in the context of the above discussion, what is striking about recent Review findings is how closely they resonate with the conclusions of previous reviews. It seems there is much

consensus about ‘what’ we need to do to improve education and learning outcomes but much less conviction about ‘if’ and ‘how’ we can do that (McCulloch and Taylor, 2018). As always, social work operates in a political and public market and often finds itself playing ‘second fiddle’ to other more prominent public services. Added to this, political spotlights move quickly, particularly in seasons of rapid reform. If social work education was briefly in the political spotlight, that light has almost certainly moved on. Currently, the sector is in the throes of developing a National Health and Social Care Workforce Plan, a complex three-part plan currently focussed on developing the Social Care workforce for Scotland. This plan will almost certainly shape the future form and function of social work education and learning, however, the extent to which developing plans and priorities connect within even recent review findings and conclusions is, for now, unclear.

Considered from this vantage point, a current challenge facing social work education in Scotland may be the marginal or ambivalent position social work education and learning occupies within the profession. Unlike in England, it’s not that political and professional actors are against social work education per se (McCulloch and Taylor, 2018), it’s more a question of does education especially matter? In recent years, education communities have continued to do what they do, as per the Framework and Standards for Social Work Education in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2003). But the Framework and Standards have little, if any, currency in practice. Relatedly, recent analysis of the learning and development experiences of NQSWs in Scotland suggests that on completion of qualifying ‘education’ newly qualified social workers effectively embark upon a new programme of ‘training’ under the banner of workforce development, with little evident connect between the two. To date, little attention has been given to the

philosophical, pedagogical or theoretical continuity that exists between pre and post qualifying learning frameworks, speaking to a dearth of critical theorising and debate around these issues.

Some might argue that the above dualities reflect the deprofessionalisation of social work discussed by Dominelli (1996) and others, or the techno-rational lean of new public management reform and governance (Broucker and De Wit, 2015), or the failure of education providers to keep pace with public sector and professional shifts. But might it also reflect a failure within the profession to articulate and embody a shared learning identity, philosophy and practice that has purchase across learning and practice sites, and indeed amongst social workers themselves? The question being posed here is, does social work, locally and/or globally, have a signature learning philosophy and practice that serves as a useful frame for developments in professional education, learning, practice and research? Recent enquiry in this area in Scotland and the UK would suggest not, with troubling effects (McCulloch and Taylor, 2018; Whyte, 2016; Munro, 2011; Scottish Executive, 2006). As observed in the opening lines of this paper, social work education and research has long occupied a tentative place in the academy, and education and learning an ambivalent place in the profession. These enduring ambivalences present particular challenges for a profession entering another period of transition in the form of integrated services. If social workers cannot collect under a shared learning philosophy, identity and practice, stimulated in education and embodied through practice, it is difficult to see how the profession can thrive amongst professional partners who can.

Conclusions and questions

Social work education in Scotland has a long history. It has many strengths yet is facing new and enduring challenges in a context of economic, social and political change. Understanding and scaling those challenges requires that we move forward with a more critical understanding of our present and our past, and of the lessons that emerge across the piece.

From the above analysis we can observe that social work and social work education, though resolutely practical, is also complex and plural. As Clark and Volz observe (2012, 58-59):

There is no single conception of social work that can be unambiguously recommended to the student. ... the different ideas about what social work is are inherent in the nature of the profession and are written into its moral constitution.

Relatedly, though the pursuit of a prescriptive and standardised approach to professional education, learning and practice is to be expected in neo-modern public services, we should remember that these approaches have limited validity for human service work and for social work in particular (see also Webb, 2001; Dominelli, 1997, 1996).

Linked to this, social work and social work education, while engaged with 'what is', is at the same time orientated towards individual and social transformation, through co-operative and empowering relationships. In this respect, social work is as much a moral and value-based activity as it is a scientific one.

These are our professional foundations. The task of social work education and learning is not to attempt to resolve the tensions that arise from these foundations, it is to equip and empower the profession to function usefully and critically within them. But how best to do that? How to educate, equip and sustain a profession positioned persistently in the crossroads of contested ideas and ideology regarding the what, why, how and who of individual and social change?

While partial and periodic attention has been given to some of the above questions, see, for example, *Changing Lives* (Scottish Executive, 2006) and Croisdale-Appleby's (2014) recent discussion of a three-strand identity for social work, these issues remain significantly under-theorised within academic and professional communities (McCulloch et al. 2016). Indeed, as practice has had to become more fluid to respond to changing needs, politics, demands, and population flows, it might be observed that UK social work education, learning and research has failed to adapt to these changes and may have become more conservative in its ambition and outlook. In some respects, this situation speaks to wider socio-political pressures and preoccupations with risk and related political concerns to control professions, but it also reflects a paucity of theory and theorising about social work knowledge and critical pedagogies. As social work education finds itself within an increasingly buoyant professional learning market, it might be observed that the profession is less in need of 'new models' of learning than it is in need of a more robust critical pedagogy (see also Coutts and Brotchie, 2017).

Last, any meaningful engagement with questions of learning identity, philosophy and pedagogy must extend beyond academic communities into the communities in which professional learning takes place. A classical reading of education underscores that education and learning is about more than the transmission of prescribed knowledge and skill. It also involves a fundamental transformation in a learner's understanding and being. As has been argued, this requires intellectual autonomy – an ability to think, decide and act for oneself rather than accept and apply received knowledge uncritically. But it also involves an element of personal investment and authenticity. Social work education should provide the foundation, theoretical frameworks and stimuli for a lifelong learning identity and practice, but it is an identity that must be nurtured and embodied in practice.

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