

## PERSPECTIVES ON THE COMMUNITY EDUCATION MODEL OF SOCIAL WORK: IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION AND PRACTICE

LK Engelbrecht

University of Stellenbosch

### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this paper is to construct perspectives on community education as a model of community work by unpacking the knowledge of community education that exists in social work, and packaging it in the context of social work's response to contemporary risk issues, in order to identify implications for social work education and practice. This is done by motivating the addressing of risk issues by means of community education, exploring the roots of the community education model, examining the relationship between community development and community work, analysing the theoretical foundation of the community education model, and by conceptualising an ideal type of community education. Core concepts of community education arising from these contexts are also elucidated.*

The mission of social work has always included a people-focused development philosophy that is proactive and preventative in its approach to address present and anticipated issues (Anderson, Wilson, Mwansa & Osei-Hwedie, 1994). This people-focused development philosophy is based on the assumption that all people should have access to goods, services, opportunities, decision-making processes and information (Osei-Hwedie, 1990:89-90). In such a context, it follows that there will always be a common educational component in social work, since education in some form or other will occur when information is offered to people in communities.

The idea of community education is nothing new in social work. In South Africa community education is presently widely utilised as a model for community work by practising social workers. Recent research has shown that in the North-West Province of South Africa the community education model (consisting of corresponding sub-models) is employed as a primary model by social workers. In community-based organisations, 72,4% of the community work projects of the investigative group concerned practised this model (Van der Berg & Weyers, 2004:352-353). Although the statistics of one province in South Africa cannot simply be generalised, it does give an indication that community education is being utilised to a significant extent in practice. This is particularly true with regard to issues such as Aids and poverty, which are common throughout the world. This has implications for the education of social work students and for social work practice in general.

The purpose of this paper is to construct perspectives on community education as a model of community work by unpacking the knowledge of community education that exists in social work, and packaging it in the context of social work's response to contemporary risk issues, in order to identify implications for social work education and practice. This is done by motivating the addressing of risk issues by means of community education, exploring the roots of the community education model, examining the relationship between community development and community work, analysing the theoretical foundation of the community education model, and by conceptualising an ideal type of community education. Core concepts of community education arising from these contexts are also elucidated.

## **RISK ISSUES**

As the links between countries become closer and more complex, the issues and concerns that affect one region of the world become the concerns of every other region, everywhere. It is impossible within the scope of this paper to provide comprehensive and systematic coverage of the world's pressing issues, since global risk problems can vary, ranging from Aids; poverty; economic, social and political concerns; to environmental and security matters (State of World Population Report, 2004). With reference to addressing risk issues, it is obvious that developmental and economic paradigms have thus far failed to eradicate the ailments of the world (Mugo, 1999:227). As social work is a profession that responds to society, there should be a continuous search within the social work context for models, methods and processes with which to address contemporary risk issues. Familiar technology such as community education ought to be re-evaluated to fit in with contemporary processes such as social development. In this connection the question asked by Max-Neef (1991:16) is especially relevant: how can one determine whether one development process is better than another? In this paper it is not suggested that community education is a better or more effective model with which to address risk issues, but it is most relevant that the acquisition of knowledge, values and skills by people in the community has always been the foundation of all human development. Community education is at the heart of human development and has played a vital role throughout the history of social work.

## **THE ROOTS OF THE COMMUNITY EDUCATION MODEL**

Every society at every stage of development has devised ways and means to provide services for those in need. In the Western world Settlement Houses emerged from Charity Organization Societies. Rather than looking to the individual character as the root cause of social problems, Settlement House leaders typically saw environmental factors as being responsible for the conditions they deplored. In everything they undertook, Settlements tried to help their neighbours develop their potentialities to the fullest. There was great emphasis on education of all kinds (Garvin & Cox, 1987:34-35).

In other parts of the world, for example in traditional African communities, social needs and problems are dealt with by the family, both the immediate and extended family (Rwomire & Radithhokwa, 1996:6-7). Non-formal education from generation to generation has, therefore, been part of people's social existence. In this respect Mugo (1999:222) refers to education where practices were not trapped between walls. The community, the world and life itself were the 'school' and education thus obtained, lasted for life. People collectively generated and defined their own knowledge and developed skills that met societal needs. However, over time the state gradually assumed a greater role as the principal source of social provision. Modern society has become so complex that state intervention in social welfare developed logically as a universal phenomenon.

The idea of community education can be traced back to the adult education of the masses and literacy initiatives. In many respects community education was the forerunner of community development (Weyers, 2001:11). It is thus acknowledged that community education is central to development and that it is one of the priority long-term solutions to provide the necessary capacity and conditions for sustainable social development (Popple, 1996; Rothman & Tropman, 1987; Rothman, 1996; Weil & Gamble, 1995; Weil, 1996; Weyers, 2001). Social work, as one of the core professions within the social welfare field, plays a pivotal role in the attainment of community development goals. In order to explain the latter statement it is necessary to elucidate the relationship between community work and community development.

## **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMMUNITY WORK AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

The relationship between community work and community development will be explained according to the traditional approach. Community development is seen as the umbrella concept and refers to the conscious efforts of change agents that are aimed at achieving objectives within various spheres of community life. The concept community work is used in a narrower sense and refers specifically to the method used by social workers to bring about changes that are particularly beneficial to the social sphere of community life (Weyers, 2001:27). This implies that the social worker facilitates the process of learning, growth and development. The focus is on facilitating the development of people and not on the development of objects. Development strategies are not pre-planned from outside the community, but planned with and alongside the community through sharing and mutual learning within a people-centred paradigm (Schenck & Louw, 1995:84-88).

## **THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF THE SOCIAL WORK COMMUNITY EDUCATION MODEL**

The analysis of theoretical models provides a valid foundation to structure activities in community work. Rothman and Tropman's (1987) and Rothman's (1996) three models of community practice according to selected practice variables, namely locality development, social planning and social action, are generally accepted as a sound theoretical foundation for community work. Similarly, Weil and Gamble's (1995) and Weil's (1996:5-67) eight current models of community practice in social work also define community practice, clarify its domain and illustrate its diversity. In both models (Rothman & Tropman, 1987; Weil & Gamble, 1995) education as the social worker's role is implied.

Popple (1996) identifies six models of community work practice, and specifically specifies community education as a model. The purpose of community education is described as bringing education and community into a closer and more equal relationship. Weyers (2001) identifies five models of community work from a South African perspective. They cover community development, social planning, social marketing, social action and community education. The author operationalises each model in a practical way. The community education model that is utilised to equip community members with the necessary knowledge, insight and skills to function optimally in the community, is also explained.

The starting point in assessing an optimum practice mode at any given time is to identify key or fundamental variables. Variables inherent in the previously mentioned models of community education (Popple, 1996; Weyers, 2001) can be identified in the following way: the community's relationship to the power structures that impact upon them; community circumstances; needs, problems and strengths in the community; and the basis on which workers are involved (Jeffries, 1996:106-107). These variables are accepted as the foundation for the community education model of social work and are integrated in this discussion.

One can therefore agree with Rothman and Tropman (1987) and Weil (1996:7) that a model is not intended to signify a 'boxed in', isolated or fixed approach with impermeable boundaries, but that models can be 'mixed and phased' to be most effective in a current situation or stage of organisational or community development. This is illustrated by the different aspects of community education that fit into various approaches (Popple, 1996:171). In this regard three approaches of the community education model can be distinguished, namely the civil and social education approach (where communities are enabled through non-formal and informal learning

experiences to function as 'responsible citizens'), the life skills approach (where the focus is on life skills) and the learning skills approach (where the focus is on literacy) (Weyers, 2001:11).

The theoretical underpinning of the community education model can be utilised to construct an 'ideal type' (Weil, 1996:58) of community education in order to interpret and respond to contemporary social issues. One may therefore ask: what is the ideal type of community education?

## THE IDEAL TYPE OF COMMUNITY EDUCATION

The social worker's role as educator is comprehensively described in literature that focuses on general social work practice. Miley, O'Melia and DuBois (2001:18-20) describe education as a function of social work. They distinguish various educational roles of the social worker, amongst others the teacher role, the trainer role and the outreach role on micro-, mezzo- and macro-levels. These authors regard education as inherent in all other social work activities, even though education is identified as a separate function. Furthermore, they believe that education requires an empowering information exchange between a client system and a social work practitioner. They emphasise the fact that the educational function of social work respects the knowledge and experience that all parties contribute. On a macro-level these roles of the social worker are directed mainly towards increasing awareness of social issues and early prevention.

Homan (1999:21-22) concurs by regarding education only as part of other methods, which has to be augmented in order to motivate people to act in a meaningful manner. The author also sees community education as a typical form of community activity and as a basic means for assisting the community by bringing matters to the community's attention and preparing them for knowledgeable action. Homan (1999:252, 346) postulates that, although education is a precondition for action, it is not action as such. Having knowledge of something does not guarantee that action will take place. The author warns that when education becomes the goal during intervention, social workers may be inclined to think that the knowledge that has been conveyed is sufficient for corrective action by the community. In connection with the goals of education, Henderson and Thomas (1990:214) refer to process goals that include educational aims, and focus on growth or maturity in civic affairs, rather than on solving a particular problem or meeting a specific need.

The views on education of Schuller, Preston, Hammond, Bassett-Grundy and Bynner (2004:14) embrace the aforementioned argument. According to these authors, it is important to avoid simplistic conclusions about education that suggest that a single input regarding education will resolve social problems. Education is rather regarded as a lifelong learning process that is an integral part of people's lives. Lifelong learning can be regarded as non-formal education, a concept that is used to describe any educational activity outside the established formal system. It is, therefore, an open-ended process that may never be completed (Brimoh, Adeola & Mohasi, 1995:39).

Lifelong learning corresponds to Freire's (1972) postulation of 'popular education', which is conducted outside the formal education system. Freire (1972) advocated problem-posing education, which stressed communication and partnership in learning. This idea of community education is therefore viewed from a people-centred perspective that entails, inter alia, that people learn together and from one another instead of being taught/trained through adult or community education programmes by 'experts' (Schenck & Louw, 1995:89).

Non-formal education is an important technique of social work and has a part to play in the process of consciousness raising (Gathiram, 2003:46). In this view, conscientisation facilitates the

creation of the will to change, which is an essential ingredient of community involvement (Molefe, 1996:25). The extensive work of Freire (1970, 1972, 1973) centres on conscientisation. Freire believes that educators have to work on the range of experiences that people bring to the learning situation. The educational process entails providing opportunities for people to validate their experiences, dreams, culture and values. Conscientisation is a participatory, collective, action-reflection process that can only occur through dialogue. Education for conscientisation is therefore the antithesis of banking education, where members of the community are regarded as empty vessels and the social worker as the depositor who fills the receptacles with as much information as possible.

Therefore, community education entails facilitating and sharing existing and collective knowledge and skills, or acquiring knowledge and skills in a way decided upon in collaboration with the community. The community is involved in what is being learnt and how they want to learn, based on the 'core business' of community education, namely the elimination of the disempowering effects of ignorance, by improving the literacy and skills level of communities (Weyers, 2001:162). Education generated through literacy should not prevail over that generated from the oral tradition (Mugo, 1999:225). Literacy and skills must, however, be viewed in a greater context. Literacy refers to the 'power of knowing' and skills to the 'ability to do or to influence'. The context of literacy can vary from academic literacy, economic literacy, environmental literacy to civil literacy (Weyers, 2001:162).

Education for sustainable development should face the challenge of drawing the best from existing indigenous paradigms that are relevant to current needs. This implies that community education should reflect an insight into the inextricable link between education and culture. This means utilisation of relevant communication technology and the development of indigenous education systems for an emancipatory practice (Mugo, 1999:225). Hoppers, Moja and Mda (1999:235) concur by arguing that education should have a cultural component which specifically draws upon indigenous knowledge and culture. However, the question here is: "Will the dominant culture mould and shape indigenous practice or will the diversity of cultures be accommodated?" (Gray & Allegritti, 2003:322). Or will it be a case of 'civilizing the savages' and 'educating the primitive'? (Osei-Hwedie, 2002:312). To be relevant in an appropriate local context and to be 'doing good social work' (Gray, 2003:xxi) are ways in which a social worker can respond.

## **CORE CONCEPTS OF COMMUNITY EDUCATION**

Certain core concepts regarding community education have come to the fore in the preceding discussion. Core concepts are abstract ideas that are generalised from particular situations. They are expressions of basic elements in a few summarising words. When used in reference to fields such as community change (or as in this paper in terms of community education) "...they take on some of the qualities of 'practice principles' with potential to integrate information about 'thought' and 'action' in a new combination" (Checkoway, 1997:11). The most important core concepts flowing from community education, namely participation, empowerment, strengths, assets and capital, will now be discussed.

### **Participation**

The role of civil society in development is crucial. If developmental work is imposed from outside, there will be no sustainable and human development. When development increases local levels of social capital, communities develop the capacity to help themselves (Gathiram, 2003:43-44). Participation should not be confused with involvement. Participation is not about involving the community in what social workers think they should get involved in, or how and who should get

involved. The concept of participation refers to sharing and working together (in terms of community education), which gives all people in the community an equal opportunity to have a part in the process of making decisions that affect community life (Schenck & Louw, 1995:85).

### **Empowerment**

There is an emerging tendency to see empowerment as a process with multiple levels such as individual involvement, organizational development and community change (Checkoway, 1997:24-25). Empowerment does not literally mean that power is handed down or given to people. To empower means to enable people and to elicit and increase their power by various means. It is an act of skill and confidence building and should be developed through cooperation, sharing and mutual learning (Schenck & Louw, 1995:84).

### **Strengths**

The strengths perspective is based on the assumption that individuals in communities have strengths, assets and expertise gained by experiences. The social worker needs to identify, facilitate or create contexts in which people in communities who have been silenced and isolated gain an understanding of, a voice in, and influence over the decisions that affect their lives. Thus healing, belonging and relationship building through dialogue and collaboration are promoted (Saleebey, 2002). The usual focus on the needs of people carries the risk of ignoring their substantial strengths that make them dependent upon the practitioner who defines their capacity. Emphasis on the deficits of communities can cause them to lose confidence in themselves and may result in 'learned helplessness' (Checkoway, 1997:18). The emphasis is thus on what everyone already knows and not what everybody needs to know. This perspective should be recognized and actively engaged in community education, so that communities will not remain mere consumers of services, but will be capable of developing into producers of knowledge.

### **Assets**

Assets and strengths are closely connected and are sometimes used in the same context. Both of these concepts represent a reaction to a needs-based approach (Ebersöhn & Eloff, 2003:13). However, an asset could be anything that is utilised and shared to the benefit of others, and could therefore include strengths. In terms of community education, community members are regarded as experts of their own situation and their viewpoints are essential to any education that occurs. The social worker does not simply provide a service to the community, but connects people to assets and therefore does not maintain an authoritative and paternalistic approach towards the community, but is supportive and acts as a partner in all community affairs.

### **Capital**

With regard to community education, capital can be regarded as "...learning as a process whereby people build up - consciously or not - their assets in the shape of human, social or identity capital, and then benefit from the returns on the investment in the shape of better health, stronger social networks, enhanced family life, and so on" (Schuller *et al.*, 2004:12). Social capital refers to various social factors, such as norms and networks that enable people to take collective action to contribute to well-being (McMichael & Manderson, 2004:89). Human capital refers to the knowledge and skills possessed by individuals and which enable them to function effectively in economic and social life. Education can play a part in enabling individuals to sustain their individual identity capital within the local or national identity (Schuller *et al.*, 2004:12-19). According to Schuller *et al.* (2004:20), these concepts (human, social and identity capital) are vital

factors at almost every stage of the learning process. These concepts are part of the outcomes of learning and are major determinants of motivation, whether or not people choose to engage in learning.

## **PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNITY EDUCATION AND THE RESULTANT IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND PRACTICE**

To achieve the objectives of this paper, 11 perspectives on community education, which have been constructed from the foregoing theoretical exposition, are presented. Each perspective is followed by resulted implications for social work education and practice. These perspectives can serve as a guide for social work educators and practitioners to execute the community education model.

### **Perspective 1:**

A social work response to risk issues such as Aids, poverty, economic, social, political, environmental and security matters will include components of community education.

### **Implications:**

In compiling curricula and welfare programmes, educators of students as well as practitioners ought to give priority to local risk issues that correlate with global risk issues, especially with regard to prevention. This is important because the issues and concerns that affect one region of the world soon become the concerns of everyone in every region. Since components of community education are always present in community work, students and practitioners need specific knowledge, values and skills that are required for community education in a specific environment. Students must be prepared by means of exposure to environments with different and corresponding risk issues - not only locally, but also internationally - to be able to understand the value of utilising the community education model.

### **Perspective 2:**

Community education has been a general social responsibility throughout history, but present risk issues compel the social work profession to consciously accept co-responsibility for community education within the broader context of community development.

### **Implications:**

If social work wishes to continue to exist as a profession that is a response to society, social workers and social work students will have to realise that they have a leadership role to play in the broader context of community development. The contribution of social work towards reclaiming civil society is at stake, especially within the sphere of other professional groups in the field of social welfare. Contemporary risk issues in society, particularly as a result of globalisation, are presently so complex that civil society needs intervention by professional and specialised experts. It is, therefore, a great challenge for social work students and practitioners to be both leaders and educators in a complementary manner.

### **Perspective 3:**

The theoretical underpinning of the community education model can be utilised to construct an ideal type of community education.

**Implications:**

Both educators of social work students and practitioners must understand the knowledge base of social work – namely assessment, person in the situation, relationship, process and intervention (Johnson, 1995:21). This must not be seen in isolation but in the social climate of the day and in the contemporary social welfare scene. This knowledge base of social work must be integrated and utilised in a manner that complements community education. The ideal type of community education is thus inherent to social work in the same way as psycho-social therapy and other fundamental and traditional social work models are.

**Perspective 4:**

The ideal type of community education is based on a mutual exchange of knowledge, skills and ideas with the community, which implies horizontal learning.

**Implications:**

Although a leadership role in community education ought to be adopted by social work students and practitioners, this does not mean that they should reveal an 'I know best' and 'I will teach you' attitude. A blending of pedagogy and andragogy would be more appropriate (Knowles, 1995). This approach will allow students and practitioners to pursue the principles of teaching strategies that are tuned in to the learning patterns of specific members of particular communities. Reciprocity is, therefore, an enduring principle that must be maintained.

**Perspective 5:**

Community education is a function of social work on a macro-level and an identifiable role of the social worker in partnership with the community.

**Implications:**

Facilitation skills are inextricably part of the professional competencies of social work students and practitioners in all functions that are performed on a macro-level. This will generate and maintain partnership with the community. Community education in social work is impossible if this partnership with the community is lacking.

**Perspective 6:**

Community education is a precondition for action by the community and therefore it is inherent in all other social work activities.

**Implications:**

Social work students and practitioners must realise that education alone is not sufficient to address risk issues in communities. Actions in communities must include components of knowledge, as well as values and skills. The creative blending of knowledge, values and skills (Johnson, 1995:53) must be part of any community intervention.

**Perspective 7:**

Community education is not an isolated, single occurrence, but it is process driven. Prevention, awareness and consciousness-raising are pursued as process goals.

**Implications:**

Both social work students and practitioners must understand that community education is essentially process driven and should be utilised in a way that complements other social work models. In order to appreciate this aspect of community education, students and practitioners must possess specialised skills, especially those of consciousness-raising of the community.

**Perspective 8:**

Community education is mainly non-formal, lifelong, open-ended, never completed, applied from a people-centred perspective, and aimed at sustainable social development.

**Implications:**

Students must be capable of pursuing community education and social development from a people-centred perspective. This will contribute towards practitioners' ultimately regarding community education as indispensable to social development.

**Perspective 9:**

The social worker's response is situation-relevant and related to local culture and indigenous knowledge since all activities, ideas, processes and techniques of community education reflect the socially constructed reality of a given society.

**Implications:**

Multicultural competencies are inextricably part of the tools used by students and practitioners in community education, since the content, method and process of education are directed by the relevant community's culture. In this way community members can receive, understand and integrate learning experiences in their world. Students and practitioners must, therefore, have a culture-friendly attitude in order to facilitate indigenous knowledge and to synthesise it into a meaningful whole. Cultural friendliness in community education must become part of students' and practitioners' identity.

**Perspective 10:**

By means of a strengths perspective the knowledge that already exists in a community is extended to become assets that fortify the human, social and identity capital of communities.

**Implications:**

The importance of a strengths perspective must be instilled in social work students so that the focus on assets and human, social and identity capital of communities would be a perspective that practitioners absorb automatically in practice. This is especially true with regard to community education, where the imbalance between the practitioner and the community with regard to power, knowledge and skills might be obvious.

**Perspective 11:**

Concepts such as participation and empowerment mean sharing, working together and enhancing mutual learning in the community education context.

## Implications:

The process of participation and empowerment starts with educators of social work students, who act as role models for students in shaping their perception of education. By means of this process, emancipatory citizenship education in the social work university classroom (Sewpaul, 2004) will ultimately lead to emancipatory citizenship education by practitioners in the community.

## CONCLUSION

From the theoretical overview in this paper and the ensuing perspectives that have been constructed, a significant implication seems to be that social workers have a leadership role to play in addressing risk issues. In view of rapidly changing societal tendencies, practitioners in the social work profession ought to respond proactively by strengthening their traditional leadership position in the field of social welfare. Community education as a model of community work has been presented in this paper as an example of strengthening the professional leadership role of social workers. Leadership in community education, with emancipatory citizenship education as goal, should also be executed and modelled by social work educators, so that students will be enabled to facilitate it once they are practitioners in the community.

With this paper the first step has been taken into unexplored territory. Vast possibilities exist for empirical research that will add value to the function, place and role of social work in the social welfare quest for sustainable development – a challenge for every social work educator, student and practitioner.

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*Dr Lambert K Engelbrecht, Senior Lecturer, Department of Social Work, University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch, South Africa.*