A UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY OUTREACH INITIATIVE: AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE EDUCATION

Barbara Simpson, Reshma Sathiparsad

INTRODUCTION

Practice education has always been a core component of social work education and provides social work students with opportunities to "learn to practice social work by delivering social work services in agency and community settings" (Bogo, 2006). The purpose of practice education is broadly to enable students to learn to integrate theory and practice, and to develop the knowledge, skills and values necessary for professional practice. One of the issues in transferring such theory into practice is "how to overcome the assumed 'abstract' nature of theory in relation to the assumed 'real' nature of practice" (Evans, Guile, Harris & Allan, 2010:245), and it is therefore essential to provide students with opportunities to engage in social work processes in the real world. Historically social work agencies acted as the universities' partners in the practice education of social work students – they provided placement sites and access to social work practice and their supervisors guided and mentored social work students.

However, providing students with valuable field experiences has always been a challenge and in 1972 the Department of Social Work at the then University of Natal established a welfare organisation called University of Natal Community Project (UNCP). At a time when very few organisations were able to provide community work experience, UNCP provided social work students attached to student units with opportunities for community work practice. This organisation, now called University of KwaZulu-Natal: Community Outreach and Research (UKZN:CORE), continues to provide vital support to the School of Social Work in providing practice education experiences in a climate in which finding suitable placements has become increasingly difficult. As suggested by Tilling (2009), UKZN:CORE adopts a broader definition of practice learning whereby the identified learning outcomes and the associated knowledge, skills and values may be acquired and demonstrated through a broader and more imaginative curriculum outside conventional placements.

This article examines UKZN:CORE as a university-community outreach initiative providing social work practice education. We begin with a description of UKZN:CORE and its operations. Drawing on the experiences of university staff and students, we then discuss the value of such a project, the challenges faced in providing practice education through the student units, and the possibilities for further development of the project as a model for student learning. A review of the literature revealed that the most common model of practice education involves students being placed at agencies and there is limited evidence of universities establishing their own units. We hope that this article will contribute to the body of knowledge in respect of social work practice education and will encourage further debate on how best to provide suitable learning opportunities for students.

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UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL: COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND RESEARCH

Historical background

As mentioned in the introduction, UKZN:CORE began life as UNCP, a registered welfare organisation in December 1972. The challenge for the Department of Social Work at the then University of Natal was the lack of placements that provided community work experience for students – social work services were subsidised according to the caseloads: so there was little incentive for social workers to engage in community work. Working with the local municipality, social work students began conducting group-work programmes with children who lived in municipal housing estates. This relationship expanded when the municipality requested the Department of Social Work to assist with interviewing people who were in rent arrears in Austerville, a depressed and poorly resourced area south of Durban which had been created during the apartheid era as a residential area for "Coloured" people in terms of the Group Areas Act.

For the next 30 years UNCP provided practice education opportunities for social work students in Austerville. Subsequently a community centre was built, a pre-primary school was established and numerous projects were developed. UNCP even employed a full-time social worker for several years, but as more social services were established in Austerville, the need for a full-time social worker diminished. In 1992 UNCP expanded its area of operation to Bhambayi, an informal settlement which (similar to Austerville in the 1970s) was severely under-resourced. In 2000 further expansion to the rural Ugu District on the KZN south coast took place, providing students with an opportunity to practice rural social work.

With the merger of the Universities of Natal and Durban-Westville in 2005, the name of the organisation was changed to UKZN:CORE.

Operation and functioning

UKZN:CORE is a not-for-profit organisation and is run by a board of management elected each year at an annual general meeting. Staff, students and alumni of the university are eligible to join UKZN:CORE, but in reality the management committee is made up of staff and a student representative from the School of Social Work. UKZN:CORE's operating budget is derived solely from the interest from investments and limited sponsorships.

There are three community-based student units, namely Austerville, Bhambayi and Ugu, which are entirely managed by lecturers who act as student supervisors and unit administrators. Over the years the units have provided placements for many students and in 2010 12 students were placed at the units. This was the largest single placement of students, providing for nearly eight percent of our student numbers. UKZN:CORE thus enabled the School of Social Work to cope with the twin challenges of an increased number of students needing placements and a decreased number of agencies offering placements. The student scholarships provided by the Department of Social Development (DOS), while an advantage to students, presented placement problems for the university. Private welfare agencies in this area (KZN) refused to accept students in receipt of the Department of Social Development scholarship because graduating students were obliged to work for the Department. However, the DOS itself was unable to offer placements for all the students who had scholarships.

Social work in the units has been guided primarily by a "micro-foundation" approach to development (Coetzee, 2001). In contrast to much of the development literature, which focuses

on political, social and economic processes at the macro level, micro foundation takes into account how people experience the impact of these factors on their everyday lives. It is a people-centred approach and holds as a basic assumption that all people want to be treated with respect, a cardinal principle of social work. Developmental efforts should therefore help to satisfy people's needs for solidarity, friendship, leisure, creativity and happiness, and should contribute to removing the dehumanising sense of meaninglessness (Coetzee, 2001). This approach is particularly useful for the UKZN:CORE units, because students have limited experience, resources and time, and they can make a meaningful difference with regard to people's non-material needs.

This approach is also compatible with the Integrated Service Delivery Model (Department of Social Development, 2006). The units provide an appropriate model of the sustainable livelihoods approach, which focuses on community participation, self-reliance, empowerment, appropriateness, efficiency and sustainability. While goals in keeping with these principles may be difficult to achieve, students are encouraged to consider these principles in their interventions.

Learning opportunities for students

The Bachelor of Social Work qualification with its 29 exit-level outcomes requires that students have opportunities to engage in a range of social work activities and demonstrate a wide variety of social work skills. UKZN:CORE provides students with diverse learning opportunities and experiences that both enable and facilitate the achievement of these skills. We adopt a student-centred approach to teaching and learning that takes into account the strengths, weaknesses and interests of individual students. All intervention programmes undertaken by students are based on identified community needs. Programme implementation is preceded by the compilation of a comprehensive proposal, which is discussed with and approved by the unit supervisor. The programmes discussed below provide examples of some of the activities students engage in to meet practice education goals.

Counselling and referral: In the Ugu District and Bhambayi, students offer a walk-in service where people come in for individual help and in all three units clients are referred by schools, clinics and organisations in the area for counselling. Many queries, especially in Bhambayi and Ugu, concern the need for identity documents and government grants, and the students work closely with the local departments in trying to resolve these issues. Often bureaucratic procedures present stumbling blocks to client progress. Exposure to such realities is useful to student social workers in training as this creates awareness of the possible advocacy roles that they, as fully fledged social workers, may assume on behalf of clients. Problems requiring ongoing counselling include domestic violence, family relationships, drug and alcohol abuse, HIV/AIDS and coping with disability.

Group work: Because groups are viewed as microcosms of the wider society (Doel & Sawdon in Thompson & Thompson, 2008) engagement in groups is one of the constructive tools used in social work to effect change. As indicated above, group work is preceded by discussion with the supervisor around a proposal and careful planning for each session. In keeping with the principles of integrated development and community participation, empowerment groups are encouraged. An example is the HIV support group for women in Ugu. As suggested by Thompson and Thompson (2008), the group provided an opportunity for HIV-positive women to identify shared problems, explore the possibility of shared solutions and provide support for one another in making progress on these matters. It is worth noting that during student breaks

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the groups are sustained by a community health worker who is HIV-positive and is part of the group. She has obviously benefited from the group facilitation workshops conducted by the students with the community health workers as a way of capacity building within the community.

Other examples of group work following similar processes include bereavement groups for children affected by AIDS, parenting groups for teens and for single mothers, support groups for grandparents caring for the orphaned children, anger management for a group of people with disabilities, drug awareness and sexuality, relationship programmes for high school learners, and an after-school club for primary school children.

Community education: Community education as a model of community development (Lombard, Weyers & Schoeman, 1991; Weyers, 1997) provides excellent learning opportunities for students to assess, plan, implement and evaluate a focused and time-limited community project. "Fun" days in the community have an educational component and the dual purpose of improving community morale as well as increasing knowledge about a particular issue. Because students are in the community or community centres as opposed to being in an organisational office, they are more accessible to the community and are in a better position to involve community members in initiatives. Community education addresses issues such as violence in the family, conflict resolution, handling stress, HIV/AIDS, support groups for HIV-positive people, drug and alcohol abuse, human rights, diversity and career planning. In this way we hope to contribute to capacity building whereby individuals and groups, by building an understanding of issues and skills, may participate more effectively in their communities (Payne, 2005).

Community support and liaison: In our educational and other interventions we follow Patel's (2005) suggestions to tap into the assets, strengths and inner resources within the client groups themselves and in the wider social environment. Wherever possible, UKZN:CORE seeks to "build partnership-sustaining placements" (Liley, 2010:7) by working with local organisations to strengthen capacity and enhance service delivery. Examples of some organisational contributions of students include training and support for crèche teachers, parent groups of young learners, office bearers, interviewing skills for home-based carers and group facilitation skills for community educators. Such activities are mutually beneficial to both the organisations and UKZN:CORE.

Research: *A*uthors such as McLaughlin (2007) and Caldwell, Coleman, Copp, Bell and Ghazi (2007) highlight the significance of research for social work and link research to practice expertise and programme improvement. Social research, like social work, focuses on awareness, careful thinking and the ability to view situations from different perspectives. Making informed decisions or implementing carefully thought-out actions/interventions requires research skills. Alston and Bowles (2003) emphasise that the power of research as a tool for social change is fundamental to our understanding of the place of research in social work. In addition, studying research contributes to the development of knowledge and theory. In fact, the development of social work theories rests with practitioners who are able to test and evaluate their effectiveness. In their study in the United Kingdom, involving 85 helping professionals including social workers, Caldwell *et al*. (2007), found that 42% of the sample were able to think of examples where professional practice had changed as a result of accessing research findings. We feel that as social workers we should be at the forefront of knowledge production in our field and that such developments should come from social workers themselves and not from other disciplines. Our experience demonstrates that practising social

work and researching in the same context enhances student appreciation of the value of integrating theory and practice.

As a way of encouraging the social work community to become "critical consumers of research" (Alston & Bowles, 2003:vii), the units also offer opportunities for students to undertake research under close supervision. Often group research projects are embarked on as students are inexperienced and they can thus provide support to each other. Students have researched topics such as the child support grant, drug abuse in schools, teenage mothers, and households headed by grandmothers. In some cases research findings have provided guidelines for possible interventions.

BENEFITS OF THIS APPROACH

Exposure to diverse experiences

Although each group of students works in a specific rural, urban or informal setting, students broaden their learning by being exposed to the varying contexts in different ways. While they may gain valuable experience in a given context, Evans *et al.* (2010) remind us that concepts and practices change as we use them in different settings. Our aim is therefore to ensure that students are aware of the need to be adaptable and are mindful of the transferability of knowledge and skills.

Before beginning their fieldwork, all the unit students undergo a joint orientation programme where the background, goals, management and functions of UKZN:CORE are explained. Previous students sometimes do presentations to alert in-coming students to the contexts and to the challenges in these placements. Some time is spent on the revision of social work methods, skills, values and principles, particularly relating to issues faced at the units. Students are given relevant readings to facilitate theoretical and practical integration.

We encourage peer interaction within and across units as a way of fostering student learning opportunities. When possible, arrangements are made for students to visit the different units. Throughout their placement, workshops are held on topics that students suggest such as HIV/AIDS, bereavement, child-headed households and conflict resolution. Case discussions also provide opportunities for students from the different units to share their experiences and offer suggestions regarding interventions.

The "make do" approach (Department of Social Development, 2006:5) is what many of our students resort to in the face of resource limitations to address identified needs. The units, based in disadvantaged areas where poverty is the norm, provide an insightful training ground for students, exposing them to some of the difficulties experienced in implementing the Integrated Service Delivery Model (Department of Social Development, 2006), which emphasises the collective responsibility of various role-players including governmental and non-governmental organisations and the private sector. This scarcity of resources, according to Thompson and Thompson (2008), is a challenge which, instead of relying on habit, routine or guesswork, moves us towards creative thinking and creative solutions to problems.

Another area of learning for students is that of preparing a budget appropriately and engaging in fund raising. To access funding from UKZN:CORE, students are required to submit brief motivational proposals and budgets. Once these are approved by their supervisors, limited funding is made available for transport and resources such as cell phones and materials for group and community work projects.

Mentoring and supervision

UKZN:CORE students have the advantage of regular supervision on site and at university. Weekly reports are submitted and regular feedback is provided either individually or in groups. Because lecturers have taught theoretical courses to students, they are well placed to assist students to integrate theory and practice into a professional whole (Savaya, Peleg-Oren, Stange, & Geron, 2003; Giddings, Cleveland & Smith, 2006). Lecturers are also able to help students link their learning with the exit-level outcomes and associated assessment criteria, something which supervisors in agencies, despite being invited to attend workshops on the subject, have found challenging.

Reisch and Jarman-Rhodes (2000:207) commented that the "long-standing view of social service agencies as benign partners in implementing social work values may no longer be valid". In many agencies limited resources and restrictive management policies mean that the satisfaction of human need becomes secondary to organisational survival. Students placed at UKZN:CORE are in the fortunate position of being able to prioritise human needs without organisational constraints. Working with individual supervisors within the framework of UKZN:CORE allows students sufficient flexibility to respond to diverse needs that are identified. For Savaya *et al.* (2003), the advantage of this approach for academic supervisors is that it increases awareness of the changing realities and pressures that their students face in the field.

CHALLENGES

While students appreciate the rich variety of experiences, there are undoubtedly challenges for students and staff using this approach to practice education. We discuss these issues and some of our efforts to address them.

Lack of space and organisational structure

Work space is a problem in many organisations in South Africa and this is not unique to the units, nor indeed to the South African setting. Writing in an American context, Poulin, Silver and Kauffman (2006) highlighted that one of the major ongoing challenges facing student social workers is the inadequacy of work space and lack of structure. In Austerville the students work from a community centre, but in Bhamabyi and Ugu some creative problem solving in terms of lack of space has been necessary. Although the Bhambayi students share offices with the National Integrated Programme for HIV/AIDS, the lack of privacy poses a major problem. For the Ugu students, during the elections in 1999, politics got in the way when the youth league of a political party took over the community centre from which the students operated. In both these contexts the students improvised by interviewing in the car, in the grounds of the centre and, where possible, making more frequent home visits. In some instances space was "borrowed" from nearby facilities (such as the clinic, crèche and development offices) for interviews and for group sessions. Despite the difficulties, these experiences expose students to the nature of conflicts and negotiation in communities.

As pointed out previously, although the groundwork for the units has been set, each new group of students faces the challenge of gaining community entry, building relationships and establishing their own unique identity as a unit. This is where, in creating their work opportunities, students are required to use their knowledge to "induce a practice approach from classroom learning" (Savaya *et al*., 2003:297). Students are confronted with the realities of integrating theoretical instruction and field practice in communities, where student social work activities are often affected by external forces such as those outlined above. While students

may be anxious about projects being delayed, they learn to value the process as much as the product.

Because the university supervisor is not always on hand to provide on-the-spot supervision, one of our concerns is that students may find themselves in the position of having to face issues that they are not experienced enough to deal with. To address this, we have encouraged students to draw on strengths within their teams (unit placements are always in groups). In this regard the units provide a setting which enables students to engage in reflective rather than passive learning (Giddings *et al.*, 2006). Furthermore, we encourage students to be honest with clients and to explain the need to consult with their university supervisors before taking any action.

Lack of community infrastructure

Practice learning environments, especially where structure is lacking, pose a range of expected and unexpected challenges. Students, unit supervisors and, in some instances the UKZN:CORE management team, attempt to address these issues as they arise. Particularly in the rural areas, basic services have either not been established, or if they have been, they are inadequate and not well co-ordinated. Our experiences resonate with those of Bozalek and Lambert (2008) with service users in the Western Cape, where long travelling distances, geographical location, insufficient home visits, and a neglect of special needs were raised as issues that negatively affected service users. As mentioned previously, where possible, we have provided funding for transport, community projects and for cell phones to enable students to contact clients.

The lack of infrastructure does not always make provision for the "gradual iterative release of responsibility from educator to learner", as suggested by Evans *et al.* (2010:249). Unit students are in some way "pushed" into being totally accountable for their own service delivery and taking responsibility for their own learning. In fact, they come to accept that they actually "own" the unit. As final-year social work students on the brink of professionalism, they are expected to demonstrate initiative in networking and linking up with other service providers such as hospitals, state departments, traditional healers, community health workers, welfare organisations and other non-governmental and community-based organisations. This rich experience is not acquired without obstacles, as is frequently discussed in joint student meetings. The range of services, facilities, personalities, dynamics, communication and territorialism exposes students to management issues within organisations and community groups. For example, in Bhambayi there have been issues of financial irregularities in certain community projects, while in Austerville a community organisation "hijacked" the community centre to establish a Voluntary Counselling and Treatment centre without permission. Experiences such as these both challenge and reinforce students' identification with the purposes, values and ethics of the profession and in this way promote awareness and development of professional competence (Giddings *et al.*, 2006).

Another concern is student safety, especially during political unrest and labour strikes. We have therefore established a support structure in each of the communities whereby key community members are on hand to assist students in cases of emergency.

Community perceptions of social workers

Negative perceptions of social workers are common in some communities and we have had to be sensitive to this. For example, in Ugu community members related how social workers had a superior attitude, were rude and did not engage with communities to resolve their issues. To quote one community member "*They (the social workers) come with their big cars and smart clothes – they act like we are uneducated and low – then we don't see them again.*" Despite

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this resistance to social workers in the area, the student social workers, in their interactions with the community, managed to turn around the negative impression that many had of social workers and they (the students) are now fully embraced by the community.

In part this has been due to good preparation for practice, as we have taken heed of Tilling's (2009) emphasis that preparation for practice and direct practice must be given equal status. During training sessions prior to commencing work in the communities, students were sensitised to community concerns and were made aware of issues such as attitudes, values, customs and community patterns that define particular cultures to enable them to understand and respond respectfully and effectively to needs within the community (Strydom, Greef, Wessels, Van der Walt & Schutte, 2009). Consequently community members and the students engage easily and informal evaluations indicate that the community does value the services provided by the students. To quote one of the women in the community: "*These social work students should remain with us permanently. Together we can go forward.*"

A further issue has been the distorted perceptions relating to the roles of social workers. Many community members believe that social workers hold the key to obtaining identity documents and social grants. This notion seems to be linked to the fact that the students operate from a loose structure rather than a specific organisation with specific roles. Students sometimes find themselves being swamped and entertain such requests because they do not want to turn people away. While students may play a facilitative role in this regard, being consumed by such queries is counter-productive for student learning. To address this issue we have held meetings with officials from Department of Social Development and devised a referral form whereby clients are referred directly to the Department for relevant applications.

EVALUATION: STUDENT AND COMMUNITY RESPONSES

Although no large-scale formal evaluations have been conducted, evaluation of student learning and interventions has been conducted via the portfolios that students submit at the end of the placement. Portfolios are a collection of student work and are a useful tool for assessing student progress and achievement (Luckett & Sutherland, 2000). The portfolios provide details of student activities and include proposals for the different programmes, weekly reports with supervisor feedback, sessional and final evaluations conducted, records of meetings and other activities, and most importantly, evidence of the achievement of student learning outcomes.

Over the years these evaluations have demonstrated that UKZN:CORE has provided students with opportunities to meet all the relevant exit-level outcomes. Overwhelmingly, students have been positive about their experience of being placed at UKZN:CORE. The following comments by students represent views typically expressed by groups of students: "*Compared to other students in our class, our group was really lucky to have such close supervision*" and "*We have so much to do, but it's okay – we have so much to learn*". Some students allude to their initial anxiety: "*Initially things were very hard and I really didn't want to be here – but I would have lost out if I didn't come – it was all worth it and I have learned so much!*" Other students also reflected positively on their social work training: "*This is the best social work experience I had in my training*" and "*Now I know how to do real social work*".

In their evaluations students also commented on obstacles in the form of resource constraints, having to cope with difficult community members, and in some instances having to walk long distances not only to see clients, but also to find that clients were not at home. One student commented: "*It was so tiring and the people lie just to get the grant. It's difficult to work with people who are not honest. You feel like a fool.*" Differences of opinion within the student

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teams also influenced student activities as evidenced in the following statement: "*She (another student) talks too much and thinks that she knows everything. I just keep quiet and do what I think is best. We've just got to manage*".

Regular discussions are held with community leaders and our community partners. Before placing students each year we confirm with the community that they would like us to continue. At this initial meeting possible projects are discussed. At the end of each year students, supervisors and community partners discuss the success (or otherwise) of projects. These verbal evaluations indicate that communities appreciate the work done by students. We also receive a number of "thank you" letters in which community groups acknowledge the students for their contributions. The main "complaint" from the community is that the students leave and there is a gap before a new group of students commence. The other issue of concern is that although the student units operate in the communities, this does not culminate in the appointment of a qualified social worker in any of the communities. This, however, is an issue over which we have no control.

CONCLUSION

Our experience in establishing an initiative such as UKZN:CORE resonates with that of Liley (2010:7), who acknowledges that that while there is no "big deal" about setting up a student field placement, establishing a "great" placement to ensure learning over time requires investment in terms of time, commitment and perseverance. Despite some difficulties experienced, a major advantage has been a well-functioning and supportive management team and co-operative community partners. An additional advantage is having students with initiative placed at the units.

The units have provided a valuable learning experience for students and staff. However, new challenges are faced on an ongoing basis with regard to funding, community conflicts/politics, territorialism and problematic community partners. Areas that require attention include research into student learning needs, project functioning and improvement, community needs, supervisory models used and formal evaluation of interventions. We hope that with universities faced with rising student numbers and supervisory challenges, the approach outlined here will stimulate discussion on further practice education possibilities for students.

This article is an amended version of a paper presented at the ASASWEI Teaching and Learning Conference held in Cape Town in September 2010.

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Dr Barbara Simpson, Dr Reshma Sathiparsad, School of Social Work and Community Development, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa.