

## THE TRANSITION TO WORK: PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORKERS IN THEIR FIRST YEAR OF PRACTICE

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### INTRODUCTION

Social Work manpower research has aimed chiefly at “the student” or “the professional practitioner”, but little investigation has focused on the *transition* from student to beginning practitioner. Although social work education aims to develop knowledge and skills in helping clients to cope with change, academic social work departments cannot assume that social work students are able, because of their professional training, to cope with major life decisions and transitions in their own lives. The transition to work is a critical one, since if it does not occur satisfactorily, new entrants to the profession will either drop out of practice or fail to operate at their optimum capacity. These new workers are a group who transport current educational doctrines into current social work practice. They are the fledgling group to whom the community looks to assess returns on its maturing financial investments in education. What happens to the new graduates in their transition from student to beginning practitioner is the concern of this paper and the year following upon graduation is the specific point of focus.

### KEY THEORY PERSPECTIVES FOR ANALYSING THE TRANSITION TO PRACTICE

Any consideration of the transition to practice of social work graduates must be contextualised in terms of the contemporary priorities and challenges facing social work and social work education and, more importantly, the developmental tasks and individual needs during that time.

Transition occurs when something ends and something new or different starts. It also means learning to let go of the old and embracing the new, and this usually entails moving away from the familiar to the unknown (Schlossberg 1984). Thus, for the new graduate, *it means letting go of his/her role and status as a student and the acquisition of a professional social worker role*. Fontana (1989) adds that this process involves stress, which is a demand made upon the adaptive capacities of the person's mind and body. These capacities can either handle the demand or find it debilitating, depending on the demand itself and on the person's capacities – since they vary from one person to the next, and even within the same person, from one year or month or day to the next. It is therefore imperative to foreground the idea that people are unique and react uniquely to the same situation; thus each new graduate will experience the transition process differently and will react differently to this process.

The transition to practice is affected by a range of influences, three of which merit special consideration in the context of this paper: the dramatically changing nature of the social work practice environment, which is accompanied by changes in social work education; the developmental and individual needs of the new graduates undergoing the transition to practice; and the nature of the transition to a work post in a social work setting.

### THE CHANGING PRACTICE ENVIRONMENT CHARACTERISTICS

The post-1994 period has brought about a completely different socio-political environment and conceptual framework within which the social work profession has to locate and appropriate a position for itself. It is an environment of democracy, human rights and acknowledgement of the needs of groups previously not fully recognized such as women, children, the disabled, rural



people and the very poor. Thus, professions such as social work, which have a great impact on the lives of most individuals, have an obligation to accept the challenge brought about by these political and social changes, more especially since the new democratic government has declared itself an ally to those professions and organisations that believe in the fair distribution of resources and services (McKendrick 1998).

Furthermore, the "social development approach/paradigm" which is now entrenched in government policy and the Social Welfare White Paper (1997), proposes a welfare system which facilitates the development of human capacity and self-reliance within a caring and enabling socio-economic environment. This challenges social work to become engaged in wider socio-economic and geo-political arenas in order to fundamentally change the circumstances under which the poor, the unemployed and the marginalised find themselves, and to improve the quality of life they experience. Moreover, it challenges social work to shift from a traditionally rehabilitative emphasis to a developmental one. This requires working co-operatively with other professions in full recognition of the link between welfare and economic development.

This changing practice environment has certain implications for social work education as well. Social work educators are faced with a major task of critically exploring the nature and intellectual foundation of "social development" and "developmental social work", and unpacking the real meaning of their constituent concepts as well as their practice implications in social work courses (McKendrick 1998).

Hence, social work education, like practice itself, is in a state of flux. Where in the curriculum should "developmental social work" be located; and what needs to happen to the knowledge/strengths and expertise of the past? McKendrick (1998) argues that in respect of the past and the present the transformation of social work education to prepare social workers for practice in a development-conscious South Africa does not require the abandonment of all past knowledge and expertise, and starting from scratch. What needs to happen is to acknowledge the need for social work education to develop "a balance between therapeutic and developmental methodologies". Developmental social work should not be isolated primarily into the areas of community development and community work, because such thinking nullifies the essence of the developmental social work approach, which is predicted upon the belief that human beings can grow in their ability to take charge of their lives in the most terminal of situations. Social work education needs to enable social workers and particularly beginning practitioners to transcend their traditional casework roles and to make a greater impact on the problem of mass poverty, unemployment and social deprivation through greater use of diverse social work methods such as advocacy, community development, empowerment, consultation, networking, action research and policy analysis (Gray 1997).

The existence side-by-side of two welfare systems both employing social workers, namely traditional rehabilitative/curative welfare organisations and the newer developmental ones, with government agencies being a hybrid of the two; revised funding policies and opportunities; and the increasing appearance in the welfare arena of other forms of social service personnel such as child and youth care workers, social security personnel, probation workers and community development workers, mean that welfare institutions and the social work profession are in a state of change. Moreover, the statutory body for social work, the SA Council for Social Service Professions, is busy reforming and renewing itself.

In light of the above context, where does this leave the social work graduate, who is in a process of transition from a student role into the work environment as a potential employee or beginning practitioner? It is not out of place to suggest that these *environmental characteristics*, over which new graduates have little control, do complicate and affect the outcome of the transition process one way or another.



## DEVELOPMENTAL/INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

New graduates, particularly younger graduates, may be perplexed or pressured by indecision as they move from the role of student to that of a professional. As Carter (1969) has noted, many new graduates are left very much to their own resources, creating complications for them in coming to a decision about work. Because of lack of guidance or assistance from significant others, some will find themselves in jobs that are above or below their capacities, and this could lead to disappointment, stress and disillusionment as they find that the jobs that they were so keen to enter do not match their expectations and sometimes thwart their desire for social status as competent practitioners.

For most graduating students the major *maturational task* is to establish or confirm independence through the acquisition of employment and the assumption of a career role which they can perform with beginning competence. Erikson (cited in Winefield 1993) points to the importance of occupational choice as a key aspect of *identity formation* during young adulthood, noting that the inability to settle on an occupational identity is the experience which many young people find to be most disturbing. Borman (cited in Mortimer & Borman 1988) also states that making a meaningful contribution through work is an important component in the construction of a positive identity.

Because transition involves endings, new graduates may react in ways identified in the social work literature on termination. For example, some might become overwhelmed by the thought of being "in the real world", others might avoid these thoughts (denial) and find ways to continue in the role of student or otherwise delay efforts to locate a social work position. Others might invest inordinate time and energy in the job search process at the expense of ongoing coursework. Barker (cited in Taback 1975) also states that part of the problem that the new graduate is faced with is a feeling of *loss*. Scott and Jaffe (1989) identified several types of loss that people may experience when change occurs in their lives, including loss of security (not feeling in control of their lives or what the future holds for them); loss of competence (a sense of being overwhelmed and immobilised due to perceived inadequacy in dealing with new demands); loss of relationships (since familiar contact with people like old friends, classmates, roommates, colleagues and lecturers can disappear); and loss of both psychological and physical territory (since they have to cross the boundary from the student group and educational institution into the social work team and social work agency and develop new personal and professional relationships and daily routines).

## THE TRANSITION TO WORK

### Work and Individual Needs

Considering the transition into work, it is important for the beginning practitioner to achieve and maintain correspondence and congruence with his/her work environment. This can be determined by the extent to which he/she fulfills the requirements of the work environment, and by his/her appraisal of the extent to which the work environment fulfills his/her expectations. In the transition to a contented and productive employee, certain features of the work environment are influential. Issues such as supportive facilities (supervision); educational facilities (staff development programmes); nurturing facilities (individual consultation); and work facilities (conducive environment/equipments) are some of the parts that combine and interact to produce job satisfaction (Comaroff, 1978). Similarly, O'Connor and Dalgeish (1986) also state that issues which stress tangible rewards of employment (salary, professional status); those which stress intangible rewards (colleague relationships, control over work); and those which stimulate and promote personal/professional growth, are issues that need to be taken into consideration if a more facilitative transition process is to occur.



Abramson (1993) further adds that entry into a new role and a new organisation elicits anxiety, uncertainty and a need to make sense of the setting and job responsibilities as quickly as possible. It is therefore important for supervisors through orientation programmes, induction and in-service training to identify the needs of beginning practitioners and to make attempts to meet them in order to assist them towards a successful transition, and to further engender a sense of commitment to the social work profession.

## WORK AND ORGANISATIONAL NEEDS

In much the same way that a beginning practitioner has needs, a workplace/organisation has needs too in order to survive. Even though social/human service organisations are there to improve the social functioning of people, they still have the responsibility to maintain their own health and survival, which are measured by their ability to compete in the market place (Bakalinsky 1980). The importance of service quality has become a global issue where organisations are required to provide services of exceptional quality and to respond appropriately to the needs of the communities at hand (Sharfstein and Goldberg 1990). As Van Niekerk (1998) states, service quality programmes create loyal clients, who will continue to utilise and support these organisations – be they profit-making, non-profit organisations or public enterprises.

Another important factor to consider is that at the macro level social work organisations are in competition with services provided by, for example, education and health care organisations, and at the micro level social work organisations are in competition with one another for limited public and private funds and resources.

Moreover, social /human service organisations have been criticised by many writers for being too bureaucratic, thus not permitting beginning practitioners to employ the values, knowledge and skills that their training has prepared them to use. An inherent dilemma in the interaction between professional and bureaucratic organisations is the degree of accommodation between professional norms and values and organisational demands and needs (Hansefeld and English 1974). O'Brien (1990) further adds that reduced autonomy is the other constraint that social workers have to contend with, particularly beginning practitioners, brought about by institutionalised supervisory, administrative control of social workers. In this context, then, supervision is maintained for bureaucratic rather than professional reasons and is not used to offer professional development, support and learning opportunities, particularly for new graduates whose immediate need is appropriate supervision with the opportunity to explore their feelings, practice skills and professional judgement.

Against the background of such highly regulated, outcome-oriented systems, which undoubtedly affect the transition of beginning practitioners, one wonders whether beginning practitioners are in fact in a position to respond and deal with these issues appropriately.

## THE RESEARCH STUDY

### Aims

The overall purpose of this study was to examine the transition to the world of work of social workers in their first year of practice, and specifically to investigate the following:

- Their subjective perceptions of their transition from university to practice, and the circumstances which facilitated or hindered their transition;
- The nature of their present work tasks, and the extent to which they believe that they can carry out these tasks competently;



- The nature of their work circumstances/conditions, particularly in regard to:
  - the bureaucratic nature of social work settings;
  - the system of supervisory control of social work practitioners;
  - the nature and extent of support facilities offered to them;
- The extent to which they assess their professional education and training to have equipped them with the knowledge and skills to perform their present work tasks and to function effectively within their work circumstances/conditions;
- On the basis of the data gathered above, to formulate recommendations relating to:
  - the role of universities in preparing students to cope as beginning social workers, and to facilitate their transition to work;
  - the role of employing bodies in assisting beginning workers to adjust, adapt and cope, and remain in practice as social workers.

## RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

An interview schedule which tapped into the respondents' subjective responses to transition from student to beginning practitioner was designed. It included questions relating to their race, gender, present age and university of graduation. Furthermore, it included questions relating to their work history, major reasons for job acceptance, fields of practice, their functions and present work tasks, their work circumstances and conditions, their social work education, whether or not they are considering further social work studies, and lastly, the transition process itself. The schedule was pre-tested on three new social workers and it was subsequently edited on the basis of the responses.

## SAMPLING

Twenty-five new social workers completing their first year of practice were selected from the total population in Gauteng and requested to participate in the study. The majority of respondents worked within the context of traditional welfare organisations, and the two most popular fields in which respondents had their jobs were child and family, and the medical setting.

## ADMINISTRATION OF THE RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

The twenty-five respondents were interviewed on an individual basis by the researcher between September and October 1998. The researcher used a tape-recorder to check and augment the written responses recorded by her during interviews. Each interview lasted for about one-and-half to two hours.

## LIMITATIONS

Four major limitations must be noted in respect of the study. First, the unavoidable use of a non-probability sample limits the generalisation of findings. At the same time though, there is no reason to suspect that the respondents who participated in the study were untypical of the social workers who are first time workers in Gauteng generally. Secondly, the sample is a relatively small one of 25 people. Thirdly, due to the fact that respondents were asked to recall past experiences, the time lapse could have affected accurate recall; nevertheless, it is also unlikely that they would not have been very familiar with their transition experiences. Lastly, as is the case with all research in the human sciences, the researcher's own perceptions could have to a certain extent influenced the way in which interpretations were made. Nevertheless, the researcher's skill of self-awareness was constantly put to practice.



## **FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

### **Respondents' Identifying Data**

The respondents consisted of 25 graduates, with black persons predominating (64%), compared to 28% white and 8% Indian persons. The majority (76%) were single, although nine of them (36%) had one or more dependants. Their ages ranged from 22 to 48 years, with 68% of them being below the age of 27. All but two of them (8%) were female. The majority of the respondents (76%) graduated from universities in Gauteng, with the remainder graduating from other universities often far away from Johannesburg, for example, the Northern Province and Eastern Cape. These latter respondents came to work in Johannesburg for three main reasons: jobs were available; Johannesburg was nearer to their parental homes; and Johannesburg was perceived as offering better career opportunities.

### **RESPONDENTS' FIELDS OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**

Respondents were mainly employed in four spheres of social work practice, namely child and family (64%), medical (20%), school (12%), and industrial (4%). The two most popular fields in which respondents had their jobs, that is, child and family and medical, are older, more established spheres of practice, which appear to be the main training ground for beginners.

### **RESPONDENTS' MAJOR REASONS FOR JOB ACCEPTANCE**

Looking at the reasons why respondents accepted their jobs may provide some understanding of their expectations or motivation in seeking employment. It may also be suggested that reasons for job acceptance may influence job duration. The reasons set out can be classified into the following categories:

- Personal and professional growth:

Sixty percent of respondents claimed to have an interest in the field because they needed to gain knowledge and experience, and they needed work with satisfying conditions and work that is challenging.

- Economic necessity:

Forty percent of respondents indicated that they needed a job desperately; they needed a job that pays a better salary, or that the job was the first successful application. Perhaps this may suggest that some respondents were initially not highly personally motivated to work in a particular job.

### **RESPONDENTS' NATURE OF POSITION HELD**

The actual nature of social workers' positions may also influence the respondents' perception of social work's purpose and the nature of social work practice, and it may also affect job stability patterns. The general pattern of findings highlighted that respondents have remained largely at the practitioner level of social work, that is, social caseworkers, group workers and community workers, and that none of them had yet changed their jobs.

### **CONSIDERATION OF FURTHER SOCIAL WORK STUDIES**

In relation to furthering their social work studies, 56% of total respondents mentioned that they would consider further social work studies, while less than half (44%) responded with a definite 'No' to further social work studies. Those who considered further social work studies would pursue these mainly through an MA degree in Social Development and/or an MA degree in Occupational Social Work. Reasons for not pursuing further social work studies included: no



incentive in the profession (20%); family commitment – wanting to start a family (20%); and leaving the profession due to role ambiguity – not sure whether or not they want to remain in the social work profession (4%).

### **THE NATURE OF RESPONDENTS' PRESENT WORK TASKS AND THE EXTENT TO WHICH THEY BELIEVE THAT THEY CAN CARRY OUT THESE TASKS COMPETENTLY**

Respondents' work tasks are reflected in Figure 1. The findings indicated that respondents as a whole spent 51% of their time each month on primary activities (social casework, group work, community work, family therapy and crisis intervention) as contrasted with 39% of time spent on secondary activities (training and development programmes, giving supervision, attending staff meetings/conferences, liaison with collaterals, research activity and social administration activities). They showed a predominantly therapeutic, social casework approach to their practice. However, almost all of the respondents identified with the ideal of a social work practice which encompassed both therapeutic and developmental services, as they indicated that if they had total control over their work pattern they would distribute their time in such a way that more time is accorded to group work and community work.

Respondents (100%), however, attributed a high degree of success to their work, that is, they claimed that they were quite successful with the kind of social work activity that they actually undertook. Their competence in therapeutic activities could not be doubted since they were more than adequately equipped for this role. However, these activities were largely determined by forces beyond respondents' direct control such as rigid and inflexible agency policy (84%), inadequate resources (60%) and state subsidy requirements (52%). It is therefore clear that state subsidy norms influence agency policies and hence social work activities. Thus, these factors had a constraining influence on the scope of professional choices/autonomy, and they might have impinged more strongly on respondents' work pattern than they care to admit.

Furthermore, respondents indicated some major consequences to clients, agencies, the social work profession and the professional staff themselves because they were not able to conduct their practice in the way they thought would be most effective. The majority (76%) indicated that clients' needs are not met the way they should be; 76% also felt that the agency purpose is not fulfilled adequately and comprehensively; 68% felt that the image of the social work profession will diminish; and 48% felt irrelevant in their work sometimes.

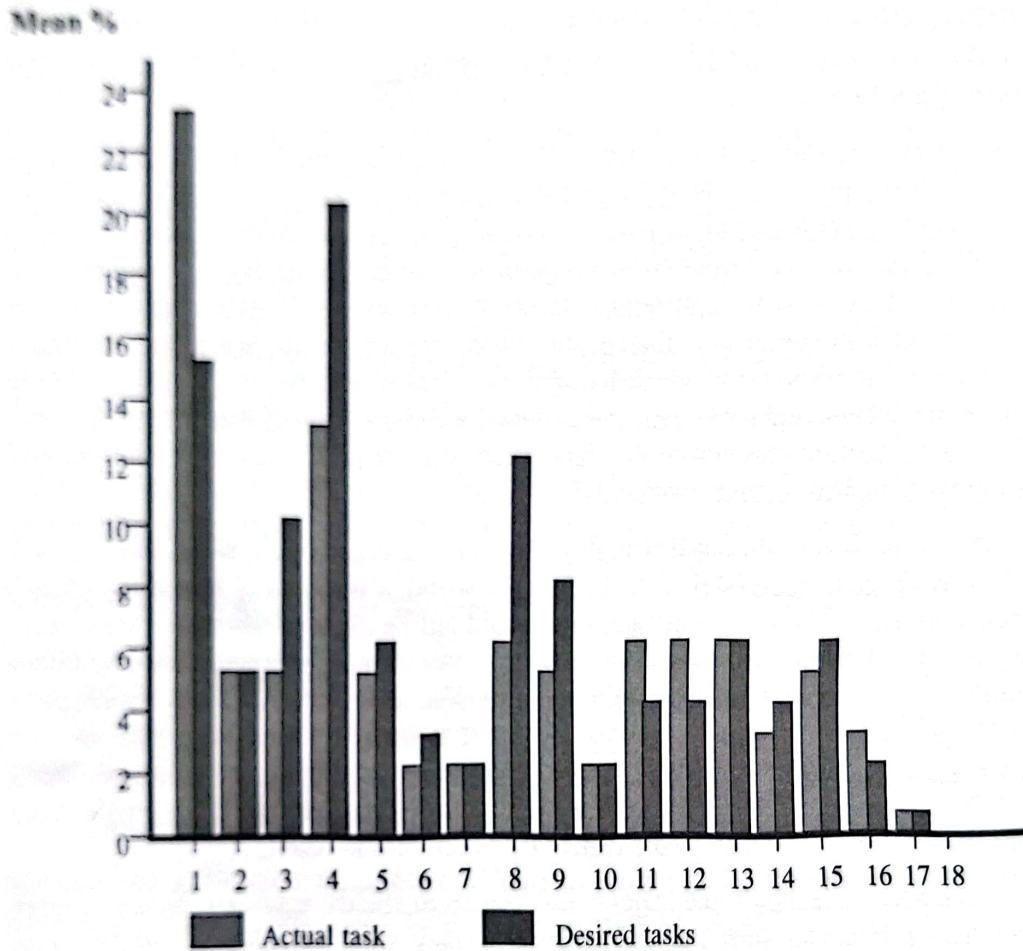
Thus the actual success of respondents' work may be questionable, because they may have had difficulty in objectively appraising the outcome of their work since determinants of their work

pattern were those factors over which they had no control. The crucial issue at stake is whether respondents' interventions were appropriate in relation to clients needs, since recent research reflects that developmental needs are a key concern in South African communities at present. It is therefore not out of place to wonder whether clients' needs were not being "tailored" to suit traditional therapeutic intervention strategies.



## WORK TASKS

FIGURE 1  
PRESENT WORK TASKS: ACTUAL AND DESIRED



## Key

## Direct Practice:

1. Social casework
2. Family therapy
3. Group work
4. Community work
5. Crisis intervention

## Professional Development:

6. Research activity
7. Giving supervision
8. Receiving supervision
9. Training staff and development programmes

## Admin Activities:

10. Social administration
11. Report writing
12. Clerical/telephone
13. Attending staff meetings/conferences
14. Liaison with collaterals

## Not classified:

15. Travelling
16. Court work
17. Sales and marketing



## THE NATURE OF RESPONDENTS' WORK CIRCUMSTANCES/CONDITIONS IN REGARD TO THE BUREAUCRATIC NATURE OF THEIR SETTINGS; THE SYSTEM OF SUPERVISION IN THEIR SETTINGS; AND THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF SUPPORT FACILITIES OFFERED TO THEM

Interestingly, despite the fact that a bureaucratic structure can provide the framework for efficient administration and effective service delivery, 60% of respondents who classified their organisations as bureaucratic-hierarchical in nature viewed "bureaucracy" negatively.

This structure is viewed by respondents as a stumbling block to practising effective social work due to its rigid and inflexible rules for doing things and due to its rigid lines of communication (44%). Eleven (44%) respondents indicated that this structure forces them to address many clients' needs within a limited space of time; 36% indicated that within this structure, limited authority and responsibility are attached to their position within the organisation, while 36% indicated that working within such a structure leads to role-ambiguity as well (i.e. being a professional worker on the other hand, yet having one's options regulated by organisational policy on the other).

The majority of respondents felt not fully equipped and competent to deal with these organisational constraints and often tended to react to them in a non-adaptive manner. Some even reflected features of the burn-out syndrome such as frustration, adopting conflict-avoidance behaviour and considering leaving their job/profession.

In relation to supervision experiences, most respondents (76%) did not note their supervisory experiences as a constraint in practice. The supervision received was viewed as supportive and flexible, educative and nurturing. It would appear that educational preparation had effectively equipped respondents with a positive understanding of the nature and purpose of the supervisory process. However, this does not mean that supervision in the work context is problem free as indicated by 24% of respondents who viewed supervision received as controlling. These respondents mentioned that failure to allow a certain degree of autonomous practice and failure to guide towards more appropriate service delivery may be as great a fault as perpetuating old forms of practice. Rigid and controlling supervision, according to these respondents, is maintained more for bureaucratic than professional reasons, since it does not offer professional development, support and learning opportunities, particularly for new graduates. It is thus important to note that whilst beginning social workers may derive support from a plethora of facilities, for most of them formal supervision is the pivot around which professional training and subsequent nurturing revolves.

On the whole, respondents' desire for more supportive facilities was minimal as they were satisfied with the qualitative supports received. Twenty-two (88%) respondents received individual supervision provided by agency-based personnel; 80% received supportive communication and co-operation from colleagues; 72% received ongoing in-service training and an orientation period to the agency; and 60% received practical assistance with their work. Nevertheless, some discontent reigned with regard to individual consultation negotiated independently of the agency (60%). This need was identified by respondents who, even if they were satisfied with what they were receiving within the agency, needed other expert knowledge and skills from people outside their agencies. Amongst the respondents who expressed these needs were those who mentioned their supervision experience to be "controlling".

In relation to factors that produce work satisfaction, a premium was placed on supportive relationships from colleagues (96%), followed by interesting work with the promise of personal satisfaction (84%), followed by a fair amount of supervision and training (56%), and 44% who would gain satisfaction from favourable working conditions such as flexitime, a spiritual environment and transport facilities.



In relation to factors that lead to work dissatisfaction, the majority (80%) regarded poor salary as the prime dissatisfier. This was attributed to the fact that some of them had dependants to support, while others were the sole source of family income; thus it became difficult to meet all the necessary basic needs on the low salary received. Unsatisfactory working conditions (long hours and lack of resources and equipment) were seen as dissatisfiers by 72% of respondents. Furthermore, 60% of respondents would have liked their achievements and success to be more fully recognised and appreciated by persons in authority, while 52% would have liked their work to be assigned in accordance with their preferences. The respondents attributed the lack of these latter two forms of acknowledgement to the bureaucratic nature of their organisations and to the fact that they held low positions and status in the organisational hierarchy.

#### RESPONDENTS ASSESSMENT OF THEIR PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING AND THE EXTENT TO WHICH THEY BELIEVE IT TO HAVE EQUIPPED THEM WITH THE KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS TO PERFORM THEIR PRESENT WORK TASKS AND TO FUNCTION EFFECTIVELY WITHIN THEIR WORK ENVIRONMENT

Twenty-two (88%) respondents rated their fourth year of study fairly highly overall. They considered their education to have been effective or satisfactory in the theory and practice skills of the primary methods of social work, especially case work, while almost two thirds gave the same rating to their preparation in the theory of crisis intervention. Other areas in which a favourable rating was given by more than 50% of the respondents were social work ethics (76%), opportunity to give supervision (68%), supervision theory (64%), social work research theory (56%) and social work research practice skills (52%).

On the other hand, the majority of respondents believed their education to have been "not effective" in some areas that may have been critical to their effective functioning in specific jobs in South African social work practice. These included theory and practice skills in specialised fields (68%); organisational/management theory and practice skills (64%), social development theory and practice skills (60%); and theory of social work and the law (54%).

Respondents' views on major educational priorities which deserve special attention from schools/departments of social work and on achieving a "better fit" between education and practice included:

- Social work education needs to locate itself within the socio-political reality of South African society (72%);
- Social work educators and social work practitioners should jointly share the responsibility for curriculum planning (68%);
- The educational focus should be on preparing students equally for therapeutic and social development roles (64%);
- Social work departments should provide a wider range of specialisation options at postgraduate level since generic social work is limiting (56%); and
- The field instruction programme at some universities needs to be more systematic, structured and thoroughly planned to give students an opportunity to develop and gain experience in the field.

Thus it may be concluded that the fourth year of study has at least in part effectively equipped respondents for the kind of social work activities they are presently doing, but not necessarily for the kind of social work activities that graduates think they should be doing, having come face to face with some South African practice realities.



Respondents' motivations for rating their curriculum effective or not effective were largely dependent on whether or not the course was perceived as being relevant to practice (i.e. perceived integration of theory and practice). Other factors which influenced respondents' rating were related to content presentation, professional growth and whether content could be recalled.

#### RESPONDENTS' SUBJECTIVE PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR TRANSITION FROM UNIVERSITY TO PRACTICE AND THE CIRCUMSTANCES WHICH FACILITATED OR HINDERED THEIR TRANSITION

While the transition from university to practice may have both negative and positive aspects, the general feeling among respondents was that this move was primarily a positive, challenging and growth-producing event. Eighty percent of respondents were eager to begin to work and 72% of respondents were excited that they finally received their degrees. On the other hand, 68% of respondents experienced anxiety and uncertainty due to fear of the unknown, that is, not being sure what the future held for them, and uncertainty about their ability and maturity to practice effectively as social workers and to deal with work challenges appropriately. Even although the transition to practice was primarily perceived in a positive way, respondents acknowledged that this move meant the loss of relationships, of certain roles, and of certain places – things that are often ignored as sources of stress and adjustment, but which need to be recognised as equally important.

All respondents (100%) highlighted the importance of believing in oneself (one's skills and abilities) to be able to face the transition challenges. Eighty percent of respondents highlighted the importance of family support and 68% indicated the importance of fellow graduates as a major support system too. Some discontent prevailed due to perceived lack of support from educators/lectures by 72% of respondents.

The predominant feeling experienced by respondents in relation to their new jobs was *competence*. This is not surprising given the fact that they felt adequately equipped to do the therapeutic work activities which reflected the nature of their practice.

Their expectations for their new jobs included: receiving a good orientation to work (92%); an emotionally satisfying job (80%); a job that allows for personal fulfilment (68%); and a job where their successes and accomplishments are valued by their employers (64%). Furthermore, respondents' ideal roles of employing bodies included that:

- they should collaborate with universities to recruit graduates to jointly organized seminars about job search and job expectations, so as to lessen the anxiety of job searches (100%);
- they should offer support to new workers through in-depth supervision, in-service training and orientation, which should focus on the day-to-day experiences of beginners and on practical work skills, and should also be specific to the field of the agency (100%);
- they should strive to become in touch with the feelings that beginning workers might have and attempt to accommodate and nurture them (84%);
- they should allow beginners the necessary amount of authority and flexibility to be constructively critical about existing patterns of practice and to suggest alternative approaches for consideration (86%); and lastly,
- they should be thoroughly prepared to receive the beginning worker. Three aspects were raised in this regard: having a clear job description and statement of expectations; having supportive facilities in place, such as mentoring; and taking steps to ensure that new workers are not undermined by established staff on the basis of race, gender and especially age (74%).



## IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

The respondents' present work tasks showed a predominantly therapeutic social casework approach, although respondents claimed that there were preventive and promotive aspects to their work. Nevertheless, the crucial issue at stake is whether their interventions were appropriate in relation to clients' needs, given the fact that developmental needs became a key concern in South African communities at present.

The findings also indicated that despite the fact that an organisational bureaucratic structure can provide the framework for efficient administration and effective service delivery, the majority of respondents indicated that this structure limits their scope of work, their creativity, innovation and their ability to intervene appropriately, and as a result it became a great stumbling block to effective social work practice. Thus, working within such a structure led to role-ambiguity (i.e. being a professional worker on the one hand, yet having one's options regulated by organisational policy on the other hand). Respondents were therefore in constant doubt about their work and the social work profession in general and often experienced mixed feelings in relation to whether or not to remain in the profession. Moreover, the majority of them felt not fully equipped and competent to deal with these organisational constraints and tended to react to them in a non-adaptive manner: frustration, conflict-avoidance behaviour and/or considering leaving the job/profession.

It is also important to note that whilst beginning social workers may derive support from a plethora of facilities such as an orientation period and ongoing in-service training, and supportive communication and co-operation from colleagues, for most of them formal supervision is the pivot around which professional training and subsequent nurturing revolves.

The fourth year of study has at least in part effectively equipped respondents for the kind of social work activities they are presently doing, not necessarily for the kind of social work activities they think they should be doing – having come face to face with South African practice realities. They believed that an improved “fit” between education and practice would result from greater contextualisation of their educational preparation in relation to the socio-economic and political realities, with increased knowledge, skills and necessary values to handle transitional work – given the reality of a society in transition and the many tensions involved in the change process; preparing students equally for therapeutic and social development roles; provision of a wider range of specialisation options at postgraduate level and, most importantly, increased liaison with practitioners in the field.

However, it is imperative to note that social work educators' responsibility should extend beyond curriculum delivery to include specific strategies for assisting students to understand what the transition to work really entails and recognising the developmental needs of graduates and the broader environmental factors that influence both the student and the transition process. In other words, social work educators have to take particular note of how graduates are equipped to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity.

Employing bodies also have a role to play. The beginning phase of employment is acknowledged as contributing to organisational effectiveness and employee satisfaction. It has been identified as affecting the degree of employee commitment or alienation; employee retention; organisational stability; productivity; and potential for innovation. This is the process by which an individual acquires the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organisational role; it is therefore the employing body's function to influence that process to help the employee meet organisational priorities (Louis 1980; Werther & Davies 1985; McAfee & Champagne 1987).



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