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TRYING TO READ THE WRITING ON THE WALL: IMMEDIATE AND IMMINENT IMPACT OF NATIONAL POLICY

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The role of social work within the developmental welfare system is under siege and it is the responsibility of social workers and the institutions that train them to take seriously the challenge that has been presented in more than one forum for many years. There is no doubt any longer that the principles of developmental welfare are here to stay and that they offer for the citizens of the country the potential of access to a welfare system that is equitable and that will promote human development. There are very few who would argue against the values embedded in the White Paper and by extension in all policy documents. Many would also support the idea that social work – along with the rest of society – has, at times, failed to meet the most important developmental challenges of the country. What this paper wishes to explore is the sense in which these accepted and acceptable positions have been taken on board to the detriment of social work only. It appears to me that the demands for transformation – and the lack of recognition of existing transformation processes – are more often than not directed at one profession only. In addition the solutions presented are more often than not directed at the development of "other" professions without ever addressing the issues associated with the possible failure of these groups to meet the same challenges in the same eras in which social work is said to have failed. It is my argument that social work is required to take a number of steps almost immediately if it wishes to remain viable and relevant in the next decade:

- critically examine its own teaching and training and provide immediate evidence of the extent to which the training of social workers meets the challenges expressed by government;
- undertake a revision of the exit and entry points and the competencies required to ensure the ongoing participation of social work in training in the welfare sector;
- critically examine the perception that exists that social work has not taken on board the policies in place and provide immediate evidence of the extent to which practitioners take on the values of the developmental process and act in accordance with them.

There are many possible ways to explain and analyse the current situation and some of these explanations support a defensive reaction. Others (Green 1999:36) have argued against the defensive position taken by social workers when considering the new paradigm. However, there is an imminent reality that needs to be faced towards which a proactive (rather than defensive) response is required. I am hoping that by providing the perspective from one lens (mine) it is possible to open a meaningful and constructive debate on these issues.

There are many explanations for the political and other processes at work from 1995 onwards but one common theme does emerge and that is that social work – as a separate and identifiable profession – is losing ground. The most stark example centres on the processes during 1996 and 1997 that resulted in the exclusion of universities from the training of child and youth care workers. The Social Work Amendment Act's sections 11 and 15 (No. 102 of 1998) suggest that more of this exclusion is to take place in its ruling that no person may "give instruction on any

aspect of any subject in connection with a profession in respect of which a professional board has been established" (Section 11) unless he or she is registered within that profession. While some universities have been able to set up probation and youth work programmes, the establishment of professional boards for these occupations may yet also result in changes in terms of how these programmes can and will be taught.

When occupational groups are disparate and where occupational delimitations are clear and uncompromising, it is understandable why such exclusions are needed – it makes sense that engineers should not teach nurses how to monitor vital signs. It is not so clear why occupational groups within the welfare sector, which is becomingly increasingly integrated, should be so separated. However, in a legal opinion obtained for the purposes of this paper by the Registrar of the SACSSP, it is clear that "it is definitely not the intention (of the Act) to allow a registered social worker to teach any of the professions for which professional boards have been established, unless such a social worker is also registered with the specific professional board established for the profession in which he or she is teaching" (opinion obtained from legal adviser to the National Department of Welfare: SACSSP 1999).

Not only is this principle exclusionary and protective, it is also impractical and in some senses unworkable. For instance, in terms of this opinion on Section 11 of the Act, when probation officers set up their own professional board one would have to be registered with that board to practise or teach *any aspect* of probation. This would effectively render aspects of many existing social work curricula out of bounds to social work or would require that, even in instances in which identical material is taught within a probation curriculum and social work curricula, these are not likely to be portable or transferable. (It is hoped that common sense will prevail and meaningful articulation will be encouraged, but the current situation does not encourage this belief). I am not arguing that occupational groups – such as probation – do not have highly specialised needs which require dedicated and directed training. I am arguing that until very recently it has been considered possible, and even desirable, for social workers to offer at least a substantial foundation of that training, just as much probation work has traditionally been done by social workers. The Social Work Amendment Act (and resultant legislation) will change that.

In response we appear to have developed at least two models for using the skill and knowledge base of social work to train other "occupational groups". In one the "other" occupation (probation) is set up as a fourth year one-year[1] differentiated programme (Honours) following completion of a standard three-year Social Work curriculum. The other is the modular system at undergraduate level, where certain choices are defined as prerequisites for certain occupational outcomes (youth work) and others are defined as either electives or prerequisites for more than one occupation (social work and youth work). Neither of these avenues remains open in the case of child and youth care. In the very active and successful political process of child and youth care in the last five or six years the teaching of child and youth care has moved out of a university social work department into the technikons and out of social work entirely. As a result the real co-existence and synergy between social work and child and youth care[2] has fallen victim to the strict demarcation of territory which will finally result in the delimitations encapsulated in separate professional boards. Both occupations lose in this process, but social work loses most.

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1 Talking in years may still be practically attractive, but in terms of the SAQA regulations it is possible for students to achieve required credits and exit outcomes in different time periods.

2 Note that I believe that child and youth care is different and autonomous from social work. They are however, in my opinion, interdependent.

It is perhaps not surprising that there has been such a backlash against social work – at times the arrogance of the profession in its assumption that it is central and pivotal to the delivery of welfare services has been legendary. For instance, the report of the Eastern Cape Strategic Management Report (October 1994) recommends that the human resource needs of the Department of Welfare be met by social workers and social auxiliary workers and furthermore that professional social work be housed in a different division from development services (1994:23)! Not only does the document not mention other occupational groups, but it also demonstrates the conceptualisation of a clear and distinct difference between social work and development. In the same year an organogram attributed to the ANC (1994), based on "discussions and workshops regionally and nationally", proposes a national organisational structure in which professional social services are separate from social/community development with social workers appearing in the former and "developmental workers" in the latter. This view is not out of line with that proposed by the Department of National Health and Population Development. They emphasised that primary social work differs from community development in that primary social services (work) focuses on the individual "with special emphasis on basic needs" (1994:22), while community development focuses on communities. At least one National Health and Population Development Department draft policy proposal argued in 1994 that social work "is the key functionary in comprehensive primary social services" (Department of National Health and Population Development 1994:11) and that the "social worker will always be the manager in primary social services" (Department of National Health and Population Development 1994:23). While documents of this kind appear to capture accurately the fact that primary social services and other models are *not* community development, what they fail to do is attempt to position social work within this developmental paradigm.

From various points of view, then, the role of social work in development was not being promoted because the vision appeared to be that social work and development were different parts of a complementary picture. While this may have changed recently (Lombard 1999:107), it is still arguable that very few social workers truly understand the full implications of a developmental approach being so much wider than simply an inclusion of community development into existing practice.

Documents like the above lend credibility to the June 1995 government policy position which includes to the effect that such as social work is not able to "respond appropriately to the most important social development needs" and where the solution is presented in the form of the employment of, *inter alia,* "indigenous workers and volunteers" (Ministry of Social Welfare and Development: Discussion document 1995:27). By early 1996, when the contentious welfare reprioritisation committee presented its report, the vagueness around "other categories of welfare personnel" was removed. In an annexure to their report the report of the function committee of the Department of Welfare listed auxiliary workers, social development workers, youth and child care workers, probation assistants and volunteers (Report of the Welfare Reprioritisation Committee 1996:34). All of these documents span the vital transition to democracy in this country and are indicative of a number of political processes that appear to have been inadequately challenged and managed by social work. What followed was dramatic.

In February 1996 the Government Gazette version of the Draft White Paper for Welfare (No. 16943) made clear that social work training did not equip social workers for developmental work; that there is an over-reliance on professional social workers (1996:48); and that there is a need to extend the human resource capacity of welfare by using other categories of welfare personnel. The White Paper for Social Welfare that was accepted less than a year later makes

the identical points, although some are organised into different sections of the chapter. There is no doubt that the White Paper argues the following about social work:

- social work courses do not equip graduates to respond appropriately to the most important developmental needs (1997:19);
- there is too much dependence on social work (1997:19);
- different categories of personnel need to be promoted (1997:20);
- there is an urban bias in existing training programmes (1997:21);
- curricula need urgent attention (1997:21);
- there is a need to standardise selection procedures for admission to the social work profession (1997:21);
- the SA Interim Council for Social Work is responsible for ensuring that SAQA objectives are met and that adequate and appropriate education is offered to social workers (1997:21).

The White Paper is explicit in its statement that there is a need to train other personnel such as child care workers (1997:21); that provision will be made in the Personnel Administrative Standards (PAS) to employ and recognise these categories (1997:20) and that the employment of other personnel groups will be encouraged in new financing policies (1997:20). The government has delivered on these intentions.

It is in this context that the policy documents of the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Young People at Risk were published. At a meeting on 13 August 1996 in Pretoria, hosted by the IMC and attended by the Heads of Departments of almost all of the universities' Departments of Social Work, the response was unequivocal. Specific objections were that the paradigm shift had already taken place and that social workers had worked within this model for many years; that the system needed to be looked at less dramatically than proposed; that occupational areas of social work were being taken over by child care workers and that many of the assumptions and the rationale for the document are not clearly presented (IMC 1996c: Notes taken at meeting: 13 August 1996). The IMC response was equally unequivocal: social work had been part of a system that had dramatically failed children and youth.

While some social workers had been challenging the predominant perceptions (Gray 1990) and seeking a reaction from other social workers for at least a decade prior to this, the policy documents already cited frame the context in which structures such as the IMC emerged. Not only had social work been participating directly in its own separation from development, but there appeared to be a lack of a concerted and unified defence of the profession. Gray (1999) encapsulates it by arguing that "social workers have themselves participated in their own marginalisation because they do not have a strong, unified professional body and therefore were incapable of withstanding the onslaught of the powerful political processes bearing down on them." In contrast, the National Association of Child Care Workers was integrally and pivotally involved. Its former director (Lesley du Toit) was appointed to manage the IMC and members of its staff (Zeni Thumbadoo) directly involved as co-ordinator of the well-funded pilot projects. The recent welcomed appointment of Ashley Theron as Chief Director of Developmental Social Welfare Services is the final irony. While originally a social worker, Mr Theron has made his allegiances with child and youth care a priority and has been the chairperson of the NACCW for a number of years.

The final piece of the puzzle is in the process of being fitted and social work is in the weakest possible position. The new Financing Policy (1999) does not deal with social work or any other occupation directly. However, in the section dealing with the re-framing of services (1999:12-13), the language of re-integration and transformation does not in any sense recognise what is being done and what has been done towards re-framing the so-called "traditional" welfare organisations, and by implication, social work. The new financing policy will do what the White Paper intended and that is make it both possible and desirable for employers to shift their employment patterns away from social work to other, currently cheaper, occupational groups. The Social Welfare Action Plan (SWAP 1998:31) provides the concrete entrenchment of this process in its commitment to "accommodate provisions to make it possible for different categories of personnel to be employed in the public sector" and to "develop financing criteria as an incentive to organisations to employ other categories of welfare personnel" (SWAP 1998:31).

Ironically it is still not clear on what criteria these "other occupation groups" are being assessed to offer the possibility of a better outcome than social work is reported to have done. None of the documentation appears to provide any evidence for the faith, in a South African context, placed in other occupational groups, yet the policy documents are explicit about the "failure of social work" (White Paper 1997:19). This failure is sometimes implicitly contrasted with other groups. For instance, the IMC Policy Document of November 1996 states that a number of institutions for children and youth, in which inappropriate discipline is practised, are headed by social workers, teachers or psychologists (1996b:69). The comment is made to support an argument for appropriate training of the 89% of child care workers in these institutions (schools of industry and reform schools) who have no qualifications (1996b:68). There is, however, no statement about institutions headed by the child care workers (trained or not) where similar unacceptable practices take place. In addition the same document indicates that only about 60 social workers are employed in these contexts. It appears to be a disproportionate apportioning of blame for the dire situation described in *In whose best interests?* (IMC 1996a), which formed the basis for many of the recommendations that are now policy. That a crisis existed (and still exists) is not the debate – what should be held up to scrutiny are the perceptions which are created by the way the facts are presented.

Given that there were at least 6000, mainly untrained, child and youth care workers (IMC 1996b:67) in the country throughout the period in which *social work* is said to have failed the challenge of the welfare system, it would be fair to expect that this group would be held accountable – as a group – for at least some of the problems encountered when *In whose best interests?* was compiled. I have not found one documented statement to this effect. This does not exonerate social work, which, by virtue of the special statutory position it held and the training its practitioners were able to access, had special responsibilities. It does, however, render the "social work is responsible" argument spurious. There is more merit in a systemic assessment of which the IMC was capable when it listed fragmentation between Ministries and departments, lack of adequate financial resources for child and youth care, and the lack of appropriate and adequate legislation and policy (IMC 1996b:3) as serious difficulties in the welfare system.

It may not be coincidental that in the same paragraph of SWAP (1998:31) in which it is stated that it must be made possible for other occupations to be employed, it also states that there is a need for "consensus on a code of ethics setting out the guiding principles and values of the *social work profession"* (my emphasis). It would have been expected that there was a need for a code of ethics for all welfare personnel. Only one page further (SWAP 1998:32) there are three identified strategies – the first is to transform the curricula currently available; the second is to facilitate standardised selection procedures for admission to the *social work profession* and the

third is to facilitate training for other categories of personnel. The lack of trust in the social work profession to adequately and appropriately transform and regulate itself is clear.

The extent of marginalisation varies from region to region. In the Eastern Cape one Director has argued that social workers cannot do what is needed in the new programmes and that social workers furthermore will not do what is required of them, while at the same time the submission to the Personnel Audit Oversight Committee from the provincial authorities includes recommendations that the number of social workers in the province be drastically increased. At a workshop on 18/8/1999 the only other occupational category raised by the Department was probation and it was referred to as a "form of social work". Whatever the regional confusion may be, there is an entrenched marginalisation of social work in the implementation of the new welfare policies. This is illustrated in the Eastern Cape by a government decision to no longer offer bursaries to social work students. Ostensibly, these bursaries have been cut for financial reasons, but given that there is an agreement that the human resources in this province are under-provided, it is of interest that the government would have chosen to stop social work bursaries and to do this without any form of public or formal notification. (Of interest too is that a newspaper article reporting on this matter received absolutely no public response.)

The repositioning of social work is complete and, although the restructuring of the Council for Social Services Professions has provided some token recognition for social work in its allocation of seats, there is very little doubt that, to date, other occupational groups such as child and youth care workers have organised themselves and positioned themselves more effectively than social work has done. When the boards are eventually set up they will possibly represent the final curtain call of the profession of missed opportunities.

In many ways this argument is academic. While there is perhaps merit in the debate, the reality is that the welfare sector has taken on board this approach whole-heartedly and there are documented examples of social workers promoting – for various reasons – the same position (e.g. JUC Executive Concept Document 1999). What matters now is getting a clear understanding of the way forward by seeking for social work a place as a profession in its own right so that social work can re-invent itself beyond this legacy. Social work – inherently and undeniably – is able to offer conceptually and practically most of the skills demanded for implementation of the new policies. However, without the process of re-invention these skills are neither recognised or used and considerable effort is being invested to create completely new training programmes for what should be complementary occupations (such as the B Tech in child and youth care).

Occupational diversity within the welfare sector makes enormous sense in that different skills and different levels of skill provide both the functional flexibility and cost effective staffing profiles needed to drive a developmental welfare system. Occupational exclusion or "re-inventing the wheel" achieves neither of these outcomes.

As indicated at the beginning of this paper, there appear to be three remaining routes open for social work and none offers a panacea for this syndrome.

The first is to consider how the requirements of the NQF process can be used to regain some lost credibility and thereby demonstrate the extent to which social work training has genuinely taken on the new policies and paradigms. Some have argued that the way to deal with this kind of erosion is to stand firm and state clearly what social work is and what social work training, as professional training, should be. In this way, it is argued, other groups cannot gain ground and social work's status as a profession will not be "sold out". Synonymous with this view is the protection of a four-year degree equivalent for registration as a social worker. The counter

argument is that the profession is not going to protect either its skill or its occupational status by refusing to entertain a more open approach. Such an approach will not only consider a redefinition of social work in terms of what is pragmatic and employable, but will concretely demonstrate the meaningful and necessary role that social work can play in developmental welfare. This includes revisiting the exit points from social work training. The second is embedded in the first and relates to the extent to which social work can find places within welfare sector training to promote and extend its skills and competencies.

The whole SAQA/NQF process has moved fairly dramatically away from the concept of stand alone subjects and in some senses away from traditional disciplinary boundaries. One outcome has been the modularisation of some programmes of social work resulting in "social work" being offered under a different name to more than one occupational group. In one Eastern Cape university, for instance, modules such as group work in the social work programme are offered within the faculty and can be accessed by other students subject to some prerequisites. In another university counselling or casework is taught jointly by two departments, but can be considered a credit for either of the two programmes involved. This kind of co-operation, which is being reported nationally, makes it appear that one of outcomes of the SAQA process is going to be quite an extensive breakdown of disciplinary boundaries. Although individual packages or programmes may specify exactly what outcomes are required at exit level in order to achieve a qualification, it is likely that those outcomes, through recognition of prior learning or any of the other mechanisms available, can and will be made up of units that are not necessarily discipline specific (SAQA Regulations Chapter 1). Taking the changes within the psychology profession as an example: the introduction and accreditation of the BPsych is a reality and the registered professional designation of psychological counsellor will be in place within the next five years. While details are still being put in place, it is likely that about 60% of the outcomes and 60% of the notional hours of such a qualification will need to be of a psychological nature, *but* there is no stipulation that all of that 60% needs to be taught by registered psychologists. (Aspects related to professional practice may differ from issues related broadly to theory or to other critical or cross-field outcomes.) Within these plans is a recognition of the erosion of at least some disciplinary boundaries along with ongoing protection of the occupational group. Some would argue that by differentiating between psychological counsellors (BPsych), and psychologists (DPsych) the status of the profession as a whole is entrenched rather than eroded by lowering the requirements for entry-level professionals (INMDCSA 1999; Gilbert 1999).

The provisions of Section 11 of the Social Work Amendment Act (No. 102 of 1998), as already discussed, have entrenched exactly the opposite for social work. It will be of interest to note that once the unit standards are defined for these different occupations, it may not be easy to differentiate between professions in many of the key skill areas. If it is not possible to differentiate between the key areas, it follows that differentiating between the occupations is not going to be simple. The regulations for Section 11 and Section 15 of the Act are going to provide boundaries and set criteria for registration within categories. If the rest of this argument is accepted, this is only going to be possible through a burgeoning bureaucracy of almost meaningless delimitations and regulations designed to protect the occupational boundaries of groups that should be working together. If this outcome materialises, it is difficult to see it as a step forward to the transformation, opening up and integration of welfare.

The Social Welfare Action Plan's (1998:32) directions on what is required in the transformation of all social service curricula[3] may be a good point for beginning an assessment of current curricula or, at least, providing a useful framework for organising a defence and description of current curriculum developments. These directions are to ensure that:

- core courses are flexible and sensitive to provincial and inter-provincial variations;
- curricula and training materials are indigenous and culturally sensitive;
- a balance is maintained between therapeutic and developmental methodologies;
- curricula are developed in consultation with service providers;
- focus on new directions in education and training in the welfare field;
- alternatives to urban models are offered;
- training facilitates community participation.

The third required strategy is the most complex and that is to address the realities and perceptions that exist about current social work practice. There is great emphasis in the Eastern Cape on the need to "re-skill" social workers and other employees within welfare and practise. The perception is endemic that social workers cannot and often will not do what is required of them as they have not taken on board the "new paradigm". The study by Ferguson Brown and Partab (1999:148) is illustrative of the problem. While a reasonable portion of the agencies surveyed by these researchers were involved in social development activities, these focused predominantly on the delivery of social services and almost none of the agencies (governmental and non-governmental) were involved in networking with other sectors in the provision for basic needs such as water. The paper does, however, suggest that it is the non-governmental sector (referred to so scathingly in the JUC concept document and the financing policy as having "failed to transform") that appears most focused on decentralisation of services and work within the rural context. What practice wisdom and studies such as this one illustrate is that it is false to state that there has been a lack of transformation in social work and equally false to say that social workers are still involved in predominantly curative and rehabilitative work. While there is still much room for development, this has been hampered, in many instances, by the government funding policies and not by the organisations themselves. Prior to the new Financing Policy there was no financial incentive for much of the development work that has happened. Many organisations have in fact been financially punished by their own transformation. Take as an example a residential care facility for children which has not had an increase in subsidy for over seven years, but is now required to work within the new paradigm which is staff and resource intensive. One such organisation appealed to the Eastern Cape government for assistance with funding, arguing that to deliver the required integrated service meant that child and youth care workers and facility social workers needed to be able to get to families in the community and children needed to be sent home more regularly. The response from the government was that these strategies were expensive and reconstruction services should be left to the "outside" social workers, while the facility focuses on the child. In addition, no subsidy is payable for services offered by the facility to community-based youth, although the policy

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[3] The SWAP does not state that these directions apply only to social work but they are listed as the first strategy to promote appropriate education and training. Strategy 2 revolves around facilitating standardised selection procedures for the social work profession and Strategy 3 is concerned with facilitating training for other categories of personnel. Thus, in its contextual position, Strategy 1 appears to be a critique of social work training.

explicitly requires services at residential care facilities to be accessible to the community. Delays in providing the mechanisms for implementation of the new Financing Policy will extend the period in which this kind of double standard is practised.

There appears to be a lack of documentation and active defense of the current situation faced by organisations and by social workers. Studies such as the one done by Feguson Brown and Partab (1999) need to be extended and a body of evidence built up which will demonstrate both the fact and scope of transformation by providing details of:

- exactly what social workers are doing and the extent to which this work is within the developmental paradigm;
- precisely how "traditional" agencies are working within the policies and exactly what the impact of working in this way has been on cost;
- where the social work profession and the agencies that employ them are working with specific attention to the extent to which the non-governmental sector is working in areas not reached by the government.

It is not enough to say that the accusations are false. It is necessary to defend them with evidence. It is here that our profession is likely to provide the last nail in its own coffin. Educators and practitioners do not have a history of working together aggressively and constructively, and the profession as a whole has failed to find one unifying structure under which to present its image. We lack the political clout of child and youth care because we lack the organisational integrity of the NACCW, which lobbies consistently and aggressively for the profession and seeks every opportunity to place child and youth care on the agenda. Social work may as well be in the biblical court of King Nebuchadenezzar ignoring the writing on the wall "*tekelmeneparsin*" – our days are numbered, we have been weighed and found wanting and our kingdom is to be divided. Are we going to wait for a lion's den experience before we act on this?

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