CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN PRACTICE: AN EXPLORATIVE INVESTIGATION

Rose September

INTRODUCTION

The paper starts with a brief autobiographical reflective narration of my own experience as a social worker. The purpose is to demonstrate and contextualise the interaction, change and inherent ambivalences in relation to my own experience of post-qualifying learning. I qualified as a social worker in 1978. My first employment was with the Department of Social Welfare (Coloured Affairs) in the Western Cape. During the first week of my induction I was introduced to two important people, my supervisor and the "In-service training manager" (ISTM). My supervisor was responsible for supervising my day to day workload. The ISTM was exclusively responsible for guiding and testing me on the content of a thick lever-arch file called the in-service training manual. The latter contained all the relevant legislation, policies and departmental procedures that I had to study and know before becoming a permanently employed social worker and public servant. Every Friday I would religiously go to the in-service training guru to be tested on the contents of the file. The ISTM was also kept informed by my supervisor about my performance on the job and would comment on my progress as indicated by my "stats". The latter was a record of how many clients I had seen and what the results achieved on each of these were. This process would continue until the in-service training was satisfactorily completed.

Those of us who were subjected to this regime of on-the-job training would often reminisce about the "old days" with bittersweet reflections of social work 25 years ago. These discussions would commonly occur in the context of our concerns about the ever-increasing demands being made on social workers in general and young social workers in particular. At present there is growing unease about the lack of support and CPD for social workers in practice. Gauging from the social workers' perspectives on which this paper is based, the experiences of social workers with CPD in South Africa are largely mixed.

Since the early 1990s there has been an upsurge of interest in CPD. Many professional disciplines have institutionalised CPD within their broader professional and/or academic qualifications framework. It is general knowledge that CPD has become mandatory in a number of professions such as architecture, dentistry and professions allied to health. In international social work practice CPD has taken a range of routes. Most notable is, for example, the UK, with the formalisation and accreditation of post-qualifying courses into graduate qualifications (Walker, Crawford & Parker, 2009). Today, the term "continuing professional development" is increasingly being used as an umbrella term for professional learning and development activities. It is commonly linked to a license to practise or for accreditation purposes (Rothwell & Arnold, 2005). There are a number of other compelling reasons why CPD for social workers must receive more focused and urgent attention in South Africa.

The sector's dedicated response to the extensive and urgent post-apartheid transformation agenda, which has focused thus far mainly on legislation and policy reform, has greatly impacted upon the social work profession. Not only did the underlying ideology and principles of conducting social work in South Africa fundamentally change, but the numbers of people seeking help and the nature of their needs expanded substantively. At the same time the rules and ways of engagement with key stakeholders such as the non-governmental sector were

changed and aligned to the principles of the new democratic state. While all of these changes were largely embraced positively, their impact on the lives of frontline social workers was seldom acknowledged. Under such circumstances, London (1996:69) has observed: "the more the profession is affected by changing conditions, the more continuous learning is necessary to avoid displacement and the more frequently different employment opportunities arise". As a result many South African social workers exit the profession or leave the country to practise abroad (Department of Social Development, 2003). Naidoo and Kasiram (2003) cited statistics indicating that an estimated 233 609 skilled people emigrated between 1989 and 1997 to the United Kingdom and United States. Their own study and others (Gray, 1996; Rankin, 1997) found that the main reason why social workers were leaving was related to the work place. These included unmanageable workloads, tensions between curative and preventive functions, slow upward mobility and inadequate remuneration. The seriousness of the situation was most intensely recognised when the "Cornerstone" study calculated the huge numbers of social workers that would be required to implement the new Children's Act (Barborton, 2006; September, 2008). Social work was declared a scarce skill and a Retention Strategy (Department of Social Development, 2006; September & Dinbabo, 2008) was developed and approved by the Department of Social Development. One of the pillars of the Retention Strategy is a commitment to provide ongoing opportunities for CPD for social workers.

The South African Council for Social Service Professionals (SACSSP) is the statutory body that is responsible for the regulation and quality assurance of matters pertaining to the social work profession. The SACSSP has been working on a CPD policy for social workers for several years. In 2009 the Policy on CPD for Persons Registered with the SACSSP was published. This policy is a fundamental part of the continuing development of social workers and therefore important to the focus of this paper. The policy is discussed next. This paper is not intended as a critique of this policy, but rather a reflection by social workers on their own post-qualifying experiences of continuing professional development. These may or may not include their experiences with the Council.

Continuing professional development and the role of the South African Council for Social Service Professionals (SACSSP)

The South African Council for Social Service Professionals (the Council) is a statutory body that is responsible for the registration, maintenance of professional standards and other policy matters pertaining to social service professions. In 2009 the Council officially launched its new policy on CPD and committed itself to "a CPD system that is flexible, cost-effective, user-friendly and accessible to all practitioners" (SACSSP, 2009:3). The focus of the policy is on the quality of the services provided to individuals, families, groups, communities and organisations. The SACSSP also recognises the needs of professionals not only to render services of a high quality, but also to be confident in their abilities to service communities. CPD is therefore viewed as a strategy through which quality services will be promoted and the capacity of professionals enhanced (SACSSP, 2009:3).

In relation to its core functions the Council provides the following definitions:

- *Continuing professional development (CPD):* A statutorily determined process that requires persons registered with the SACSSP to obtain a specified number of points annually in order to maintain ethical and high-quality service by attending or participating in activities of a professional nature in order to remain registered with the SACSSP;

- *CPD Approval Panel:* This body is appointed by the SACSSP and is the body certifying that activities and providers meet the required criteria for CPD purposes. The Approval Panel is constituted of a maximum of five experts in the profession, of which at least one shall be a member of the relevant professional board;

- *CPD activity:* An individual or group event that has been accredited by the Approval Panel to create opportunities for practitioners to gain knowledge, develop skills and shape their attitudes in order to maintain high professional standards;

- *Provider:* Any person or body providing an accredited CPD activity. (SACSSP, 2009:3)

In order to implement this policy the Council has developed a framework that regulates compliance through a mandatory points system. Accordingly, all social workers who practise social work in South Africa are required to obtain a minimum of 20 CPD points annually, provided they are registered and remain registered with the Council. At present there are two broad categories of CPD activities, i.e. individual and group. CPD points will be required in a mixed format of individual and group activities. Each CPD activity is accredited by the Council on merit and a specific number of points are allocated to the activity linked to the criteria and within the indicated range of CPD points. These points are allocated upon completion of the CPD activity. A maximum of 10 accumulated points may be forwarded to the next year for a maximum period of one year. It is also required of each registered person to maintain a portfolio of evidence of CPD activities to the value of 20 points for each financial year. This portfolio of evidence must be submitted only at the SACSSP's request, which will be based on a random selection. It has been obligatory to begin accumulating CPD points from 1 April 2010. The submissions of portfolios of evidence will take place over a three-year cycle starting from 1 April 2010 and the Council's first random selections for portfolios of evidence will commence after 1 April 2011 (SACSSP, 2009).

In keeping with the ideals of achieving "good practice", the Council will be responsible for the quality assurance of the CPD activities of both the service providers as well as the individual workers. The latter will be done through the submission of a portfolio upon the request of the Council. The SACSSP is ultimately accountable for certifying that service providers and activities meet the required standards and are approved for a specific number of CPD points. For this reason SACSSP will appoint an Approval Panel consisting of five experts in the profession of which at least one shall be a member of the relevant professional Board.

The Council could also delegate this function to the different professional boards once they are established. At present there seems to be a lack of standardised programmes and guidance on the required professional competencies and aligned critical outcomes. The Council does not define what constitutes "participating in activities of a professional nature" other than indicating that they could be group or individual activities.

The CPD policy is a product of SACSSP consultations with social workers over many years, including piloting of the draft CPD policy. The Council's intention to ensure a flexible, cost-effective, user-friendly and accessible system for all is commendable and generally viewed as a good beginning. However, even though it is still too early to evaluate the system, there is wisdom in issuing an early warning against a system that is over-regulated and bureaucratic and that functions in a top-down way. If the individuals who should be benefiting from the system are not participating actively or feel that it is enforced in a stringent top-down regime, they may feel alienated and become resistant to it. At the same time CPD must also have explicit benefits for employers (Sandelands, 1998), otherwise they will remain ambivalent about it. Moreover,

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there must be synergy between the expectations of the professional Council the needs of the employees and those of their employers. This and other important insights in the CPD literature are reflected on in the following section of the paper.

CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: AN APPRAISAL OF THE LITERATURE

Writers on the subject largely agree that CPD is an imperative element in safeguarding professional standards and promoting career development. Increasing recognition has thus been given to CPD as a systematic and ongoing process that involves a joint undertaking between workers and their employers. The literature also shows a growing trend towards professional regulation by professional associations or institutions. Regulation is usually associated with the need to retain a professional license to practice and to ensure professional standards. These underlying characteristics and benefits are evident in the literature reviewed.

During the early 1990s the academic debate focused on whether there should be such a major focus on post-qualifying education, especially if undergraduate work is done effectively. Eraut (1994) and Farrugia (1996) argued robustly that undergraduate and even postgraduate education is insufficient to ensure lifelong learning of social workers if the necessary competencies are to be sustained in practice. While there may be some variations in the application of CPD by the different professions or even within disciplines, there appears to be a fairly coherent understanding of its intent. Jones and Robinson (1997) define CPD as the enhancement of the knowledge, expertise and capability of professionals throughout their careers. Values such as knowledge, skills, attitudes and competence are present in almost all the definitions. Similarly, but with greater emphasis on the process, other scholars have described it as a systematic process to maintain and broaden knowledge, deepen skills, and update information to ensure continuing professional competence throughout social workers' careers (Eraut, 1994; Guskey, 1999; Huckle, 2000; Midgley, 2001; Wojtczak, 2002). Eraut (1999) posits that it should represent an ongoing and cyclical process of continuous quality improvement by social workers seeking to maintain and enhance their competence in both current duties and anticipated future service developments.

Nadler and Nadler (1989) provide a useful classification of the terms "employee training, education and development" from a Human Resource Development (HRD) perspective. They explain the concept of training as job-related learning provided by employers for their employees with the aim of improving skills, knowledge and attitudes so that they can perform their duties according to set standards. Employee education in the organisational context involves the preparation of an individual for a job different to the one currently held, where the outcomes of performance are clearly defined. Consequently, and in contrast to training which is job related and education which is the preparation for a different job, employee development is a broad term which relates to training, education and other intentional or unintentional learning which refers to general growth through learning (Nadler & Nadler, 1989:5).

Congruent with this perspective, Eraut, (1994) convincingly states that CPD must be more than participation in a Continuing Education (CE) programme. He asserts that CE on its own does not necessarily lead to positive changes in professional practice, nor does it necessarily improve social work practice outcomes. Accordingly, CE is viewed as an important element of a structured CPD programme that should be personalised for each social worker, providing them with opportunities to appraise and reflect on their personal and career goals.

CPD designed as a systematic continuum of goal directed interventions to ensure ongoing upgrading is emphasised by a number of authors. Scannell (1996), for example, defines CPD as an organised continuation and expansion of knowledge and skills, and the progression of personal qualities essential for the implementation of professional, managerial and technical duties throughout the working life. Likewise, Guskey (1999) refers to CPD as processes and activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills and attitudes of individuals so that they might, in turn, improve their competence in the process of undertaking their jobs. Wojtczak (2002), similarly, describes CPD as a continuous process of attaining new knowledge and skills throughout one's professional life. Swanepoel, Erasmus, Van Wyk and Schenk (2003:492) note that it is important to recognise that training, education and development are not necessarily part of a continuum. He emphasises that employee development can also occur through the process of training and education, but that such learning is not restricted to the job context, neither is its activities limited to the current or future job.

In large organisations the human resource management function usually includes the sub-function of human resource development (HRD). It is within this function that employee training and development activities are planned. Workforce planners identify the quality and the number of employees required by the organisation. On the basis of these projected workforce needs the HRD sub-function can plan the training of both current and newly recruited employees (Swanepoel *et al.*, 2003). In the same sub-divisions of most organisations' HRD other key functions such as performance assessments, career planning, remuneration and awards are all increasingly being linked to employees' competencies. Within this context the main aim of the training is therefore to contribute to the organisation's defined objectives. It is also expected that the set outcomes of the training and development efforts would be agreed upon between employers and employees.

There is strong recognition in the literature that there are greater benefits for all parties concerned if CPD programmes are designed and implemented as a partnership between workers and employers (Blair, 2000; Browell, 2000; Farrugia, 1996; Irwin, 1998). While Farrugia (1996) and Blair (2000) argue that individuals must take primary responsibility for their own professional development, others such as Wood (1999) posit that the responsibility for CPD should reside with the professional organisations that regulate professional standards. Irwin (1998), on the other hand, noted that the organisation for which the professional works must take the lead responsibility for the CPD needs of its workforce. Browell (2000) asserts that CPD should be a sound and mutually respectful co-operation between all the different stakeholders.

However, Swanepoel *et al.* (2003:492) are of the opinion that in many organisations there are often three serious problems in relation to employee training and development. These are: (i) the objectives of the training or development programmes are not explicitly formulated; (ii) the programmes are not evaluated; and (iii) the desired behaviour changes are not included as part of the design and outcomes of the development effort or intervention. They therefore conclude that the lack of a systematic training and development model in organisations is the main reason why employee training and development fail. The vital role of organisations in providing the necessary leadership, vision, strategy and environment (a learning culture and systems) for CPD can therefore not be underestimated.

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REFLECTIONS OF SOCIAL WORKERS ON THEIR EXPERIENCES AND ENGAGEMENT WITH CPD

The following section draws from a qualitative descriptive study on the experiences and engagements of social workers with CPD. The primary research questions were:

- What are the experiences, opportunities and challenges of social workers with CPD?
- What are their suggestions on how these challenges could be addressed?

It must be noted that this study focused on the perceptions of social worker about their post-qualifying CPD experiences in general. It did not single out CPD activities linked to any specific organisation, work place or professional associations.

At the time of the study the national Department of Social Development (DSD) was organising a national conference on the implementation of the new Children's Act. Child and family welfare services constitute the core business of social welfare services and are governed by the Children's Act. The attendance of a wide range of social workers therefore provided the opportunity to enlist the participation of a convenient sample of social workers. Prior permission was obtained from the DSD. The organisers afforded me the opportunity during a plenary session to explain the purpose of the study and to invite voluntary participation. A self-administered questionnaire was used for data collection. One hundred questionnaires were handed out and 70 were returned. Although clearly not a representative sample of all social workers in South Africa, the response rate was satisfactory and the sample included responses from social workers from all nine provinces within South Africa.

The self-administered questionnaire included eight questions. The first set of questions was quantitative and focused on the respondent's experiences with CPD, for example, the number of years practice experience, current organisation worked for, the highest qualifications obtained and the CPD activities attended. The second part of the questionnaire was qualitative and focused on their perceptions of the present status of CPD and their suggestions of how it could be improved. The quantitative data were analysed using SPSS Version 16 and descriptive statistics including means and frequencies. For the qualitative data analysis, content analysis techniques were applied.

The gender profile of the respondents in the sample was similar to the gender distribution in the social work profession as a whole, that is to say 82.61% of the respondents were female and 17.39% male. Most of the respondents (68%) were employees of the Department of Social Development, 26% worked in the non-government (NGO) sector and the remaining 6% worked for other government departments or were in private practice. Sixty-seven percent (67%) of the respondents had more than 13 years experience and 33% had between 1 to 12 years experience in social work practice.

The CPD programmes attended by the respondents in the past included a range of social work topics. The courses most frequently attended were in the following areas: administration and management (36%); child protection and child justice (30.1%); developmental social welfare (10.9%); trauma counselling and debriefing (10.7%); HIV/AIDS (4.9%); supervision (3.5%); other, e.g. computer literacy and human resource management (3.9%).

Regarding their satisfaction with the CPD activities attended, most of the respondents were not entirely satisfied. This is evidenced in the ratings of 42%, 22% and 19%, indicated for average, below average and poor, respectively. Only 16% and 7% of the participants indicated ratings above average and excellent respectively.

The responses to the open-ended qualitative questions are presented below. The analysis for the purposes of this paper focuses on the opportunities and challenges as well as the ways in which these could be addressed to improve the status, systems and quality of CPD for social workers in practice.

In general the responses indicate that social workers view CPD as an imperative part of their work and career development. However, they raised a number of concerns. These are discussed under three headings constructed as statements as they emerged from the data:

- CPD programmes are not adequately structured;
- CPD programmes are not accessible to all;
- CPD programmes are not subjected to quality assurance.

The responses of the participants are presented and discussed accordingly below.

DEVELOPING A MORE STRUCTURED APPROACH TO CPD

The number and range of CPD programmes attended by the respondents include a wide range of activities that could fall within the broad definition of CPD. However, according to the respondents, these are generally not systematically or coherently organised and offered in relation to the training needs of social workers. Beyond the basic orientation to the work place, the subsequent courses occur on an ad hoc basis. Most of the training was in response to recent policy or important focus areas, for example, child protection. From the responses received it is also evident that there is little coordination among all relevant stakeholders and organisations. The respondents reported that there is a general lack of service providers to conduct training.

The respondents also stated that many of the courses do not necessarily relate to what they are currently doing in social work practice. The latter refers mainly to training provided by the government's HR departments. This training mainly focuses on governmental procedures pertaining to being a civil servant.

In addition, the courses are generally not recognised within a formal academic post-qualification or career development framework, nor do they lead to such qualifications.

> *In-service and CPD should be done regularly and be compulsory, and there must be sanction mechanisms for non-compliance.*

> *CPD just happens without formal system. We don't know when, what and for what the HR training is.*

> *Inadequate coordination among all stakeholders; mechanisms for collaboration with different departments, NGOs, private sector need to be enhanced.*

Making CPD more accessible to all social workers

Several responses indicated that the current "ad hoc" system excludes many social workers. This exclusion seems to be a result of a number of factors, including the following: CPD courses are expensive and the NGO sector in particular cannot afford to send all its social workers; the information about the available opportunities is not widely and timeously shared; and the CPD courses are conducted mainly in cities and bigger more resourced provinces. The spread of CPD programmes is limited and they do not provide for social workers at all developmental levels. These perceptions are reflected in the quotations below.

> *It is a matter of one size fits all.*

> *Information must circulate in advance.*

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CPD must be available irrespective of location and funding.

Must be at different levels for all because the profession is becoming so demanding.

All social workers must be included, especially those in other government departments where social work is a supportive function.

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF CPD PROGRAMMES

Respondents linked CPD directly to (a) the maintenance of professional standards, and (b) opportunities for career development. They felt that the content of CPD must be regulated and be relevant to what is expected from them in the work place as well as to the needs of social workers. Associated with this, there appear to be a number of respondents who were of the opinion that a training needs assessment should be conducted and that social workers themselves must be involved in identifying their needs. One respondent mentioned that "it must not be about the number of courses attended, but about how relevant the content was to the work done".

There are also concerns about "the quality" of service providers and how qualified they are for conducting training. This is in line with the quantitative analysis indicating their levels of dissatisfaction with the quality and types of training courses provided.

Most of the respondents mentioned the importance of accredited courses; they felt strongly that the courses must be approved by the SACSSP for CPD points, or they must be accredited by universities. The need to have more funded opportunities for postgraduate studies was frequently mentioned.

Some of the direct quotations from the respondents are presented below:

Some (the trainers) never did any training of the trainers courses or adult education.

All courses must be quality assured and accredited by the Council.

Some CPD training is not based on the needs of social workers and not practical. Hence more in-depth courses must be designed upon the needs of social workers.

To be more effective, supervisors must move from policing and be real mentors.

Accreditation assures that programmes are clearly defined and set out to achieve appropriate objectives.

Encourage social workers to continuously participate in the process.

Programmes which are not accredited will not likely contribute to the earning of CPD points.

The final question focused on respondents' suggestions as to how the identified gaps in the system could be improved. This was also an open-ended qualitative question inviting a response. As in the above instances, this question elicited frank and insightful responses.

SUGGESTIONS FROM SOCIAL WORKERS ON HOW TO IMPROVE THE PRESENT CPD SYSTEM

The key concerns of social workers regarding the current CPD system were presented above. This section of the paper discusses their suggestions for addressing the challenges. Their responses were organised according to the issues raised and who they felt were responsible for addressing these gaps.

It was not surprising that most of the responsibility of ensuring that social workers have opportunities for quality and adequate CPD was directed to the Department of Social

Development (DSD). This could be expected as the majority of the respondents were employees of the departments of social development in the various provinces, including the national Department. Respondents indicated that since DSD is the government department accountable for social services in the country, they should, as one respondent said, focus on "ensuring a competent and capable workforce with excellent standards and unquestionable integrity – this can be achieved through a uniform CPD programme".

It therefore follows that many of the responsibilities assigned to DSD by the respondents referred mainly to the coordination of all the relevant stakeholders to participate in one coordinated structure. They also felt that such a coordinated system will also secure funding to facilitate the participation of all social workers. The respondents also suggested that DSD take the responsibility to facilitate CPD programme development with all stakeholders. Such a coordination role should include:

- Agreement on the content of CPD programmes after assessing the needs of social workers in the field;

- Raising the required funding, for example, from other departments who employ social workers and from private donors; and

- Keeping a register of service providers.

With regard to the role of the NGO sector, in particular those who employed social workers, the respondents' noted the following:

- NGOs must recognise the importance of CPD;

- They must budget for it; and

- They must lobby government to include them in all relevant training projects facilitated for government workers.

Training should take into account the dire funding situation of NGOs as most of the costs are too high and therefore automatically excludes this sector. NGOs make an important contribution in this field and excluding them from these opportunities will disadvantage the field in general.

The suggestions made pertaining to the role of service providers of CPD were in line with the perceptions of the social workers about the lack of adequate and competent service providers, poor coordination and the absence of a coherent, cost-effective and holistic "package" of CPD services. In regard to their suggestions for redress, the respondents felt that coordination should be improved and quality assurance of the course content must be undertaken by credible experts in the field. The courses must be realistic, practical and implementable. They strongly felt that trainers themselves must have experience and training qualifications and that all programmes presented must be accredited, so that there is formal recognition for learning. There was also a suggestion for different levels of CPD programmes to support the learning needs of workers at different stages of their career development. The programmes, it was suggested, should be available from beginner's level up to senior management levels. A further suggestion was that CPD could be linked to formal university postgraduate qualifications.

With regard to the role of the SACSSP, the respondents acknowledged the Council's role in administering the CPD points system to ensure that social workers met the set criteria of 20 points to remain compliant and registered. They also said that Council should regularly publish available CPD opportunities in its newsletters and on its website.

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DISCUSSION

While the Councils' recent CPD policy should be commended, there remain key barriers to the CPD of social workers in practice. This is evident in the experiences of the social workers who participated in the study. The general message was that there is a lack of a comprehensive, coordinated, systematic and coherent approach to CPD. Consequently, the following problems beset the sector's attempts at CPD: a lack of strategic vision, leadership, objectives, coordination, quality, access and evaluation. These problems are closely congruent with the key reasons given by Swanepoel *et al.* (2003) for why the training and development efforts of organisations seem to fail. These are: (i) the objectives of the training or development programmes are not formulated; (ii) the programmes are not evaluated; and (iii) the desired behaviour changes (especially professional competencies) are not included as part of the design and outcomes of the development effort.

The DSD was identified as the authority that is charged with the overall accountability for quality assuring all social services in the country, including those rendered by the NGO sector. It was therefore seen as appropriate for this government department to take the lead for structuring and monitoring CPD for social workers in practice in line with appropriate performance management systems. This was also motivated on the basis that a significant part of CPD activities take place within the work space. This position concurs with that of Irwin (1998), who argues that employers must take the lead responsibility for the CPD needs of their workforce. The literature also emphasises the importance of an inspiring learning strategy to facilitate the success of the organisation. In organisations with an effective learning strategy, the learning is planned and carefully designed with a supportive strategy, structures, processes, plans and resources (Eraut, 1994; Guskey, 1999; Huckle, 2000; Midgley, 2001; Wojtczak, 2002). While there was some evidence that the DSD facilitates the training of its work force, this did not take place as part of an ongoing systematic CPD programme. A major concern was also that because of financial constraints many social workers who are employed by NGOs are often excluded. Browell (2000) argues strongly that CPD should be a sound and mutually respectful co-operation between all the different stakeholders. The entire sector can benefit immensely if all social workers engage meaningfully in processes that will advance the development of knowledge within the already rich network of social work practitioners in South Africa. An emancipatory approach that secures maximum ownership and active participation will assist critical reflection on their work experiences in ways that develop practice-based indigenous knowledge and therefore contribute to the current gap of home-grown social work theory. This approach would also encourage staff to share their experiences by looking beyond their own organisations for new ideas and trends in practice. It is therefore crucial for all social workers to become critical reflective practitioners (Walker *et al.,* 2009), for example, as a way of "self-researching" their practice (Fook, 2002). This implies, however, the strengthening of essential organisational systems such as management and supervision, knowledge development, documentation, information and communication, performance management and programme evaluation (Swanepoel *et al.*, 2003). The participating social workers in the study were of the opinion that these organisational structures and systems are currently not in place or not adequately aligned to CPD and therefore do not facilitate their development. Documentation is essential to capture lessons learnt, for stability in the event of staff changes, and to ensure a resilient organisational memory. An effective information and communication system are vital for knowledge creation, sharing and sustaining learning communities. A carefully designed programme evaluation system ensures that internal and external evaluations are aligned to the organisation's learning strategy and that its outcomes are

used to influence planning and decision making. Furthermore, the value added to organisations by CPD in this way should be recognised in time and linked to performance management systems. At present, as indicated in the study, there is no link between training activities and the performance management systems of organisations. Consequently, key opportunities to reward excellence in CPD are lost.

Finally, there seems to be merit in the suggestion, presented by the social workers in this study, for the national DSD and its provincial counterparts to take a leading role and responsibility for taking stock of the current situation and seek appropriate measures for redress. Therefore it is proposed that consideration should be given to the development and implementation of an effective CPD strategy within the framework of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and in partnership with the Council, the social work professional associations, service providers and social workers in practice. On the basis of the content of the published CPD policy of Council and the experiences of the social workers in the field, there still seem to be gaps. The Council's policy at this stage seems to concentrates on a regulatory framework. This in itself is a progression, but it is not enough. In the case of the social workers in the study there was no evidence of their participation in a coordinated system or process of ongoing "continuing professional development". Rather, the emerging evidence suggests that there are huge institutional barriers within the workplace that hinder the CPD of social workers in practice.

The term "CPD strategy" is used here to refer broadly to a strategy that would achieve the intended outcomes of an effective CPD practice. As an example, McDonnell and Zutshi's (2006:1) presentation of the intended outcomes of the CPD strategy of the Skills for Care and the Children's Workforce Development Council in the UK, follows below:

- Improve services from the perspective of the people who use these services;
- Ensure that organisations meet the relevant requirements;
- Value workers by improving their competence, confidence and self-esteem;
- Develop a qualified workforce;
- Change from a training culture to a learning culture in organisations;
- Improve recruitment and retention of workers in the sector;
- Ensure that workers meet the requirements for registration and re-registration.

A CPD framework would facilitate the implementation of the strategy by enabling:

- a shared understanding of CPD among all stakeholders (e.g. objectives and principles);
- a comprehensive and systematic model and approach to CPD (e.g. a learner-centred, reflective practice approach);
- the development of systems and processes for implementing CPD (organisation's learning culture);
- career pathways;
- excellence in leadership and practice;
- monitoring and evaluation (e.g. impact and benefits for service users).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the details of a CPD strategy or a framework. Rather this discussion is primarily intended to broaden the debate, stimulate further research and suggest a participatory process of engaging with the problems, concerns and suggestions raised by social workers in the study for the sake of moving towards the development and implementation of an effective CPD regime for social workers.

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CONCLUSION

The literature on CPD consistently refers to CPD as a planned, structured and ongoing, systematic process of acquiring knowledge, skills and competencies in ways that promote career development and ensures minimum professional standards. The experiences of the social workers who participated in the study, and on which this paper draws, indicate that there are serious institutional barriers that impede their continuing professional development. To address these in line with best practices, as suggested in the literature reviewed in this paper, employing organisations must display proactive leadership to provide the institutional capacity and a learning culture to develop a CPD strategy and an implementing framework that moves beyond an important but limited regulatory framework. The paper also argues for constructive collaboration amongst all stakeholders and an emancipatory approach to facilitate ownership and maximum participation of social workers themselves. The latter is crucial in order for the sector to benefit from the experiences, lessons and publications of reflective practitioners who continuously engage critically with peers and service users to develop and enhance home-grown and evidenced-based social work practice and theory. While CPD is aimed at maintaining professional standards and promoting career development, its strategic outcomes must primarily improve social work services from the perspective of those who use it. In a challenging, uncertain environment such as ours, there are real opportunities to develop a flexible, dynamic learning environment for practising social workers. These include opportunities to raise capability and expertise in order to improve standards and learn from, and improve on, practice and outcomes for service users.

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