Social Work Professional Education and Workforce Development: A Ladder of Learning

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Social Work Professional Education and Workforce Development: A Ladder of Learning

Teresa Morris, PhD

Currently, Social Work education is generally housed in university settings. A “life long” learning path in the social work profession is assumed to range from the undergraduate to the doctoral level. There are three steps in the process: B.S.W., M.S.W., and Ph.D. Additional licensing and continuing education CEU training is required to protect the client rather than advance academic goals. Education offered outside the university setting is labeled “training” rather than education and training does not count towards the three educational degrees. With current social worker shortages in some states and discussions that are challenging current approaches to social work education (University of Kentucky Conferences, 2001), this may be the time for social work educational programs to be catalysts for change. This paper suggests that a “ladder of learning,” which offers a career path for social workers, combines university-based education and training, and responds to workforce needs, can be used as a framework for a revision of social work professional education. It concludes that university-based social work education may well need to be redesigned if current professional issues are to be addressed.

The Social Work profession sees the M.S.W. as the terminal professional degree and has campaigned for title protection for social workers holding degrees from accredited B.S.W. or M.S.W. programs. This is particularly clear in NASW Delegate Assembly motions in 1996 and resultant NASW campaigns. Currently, we assume that the average social worker will gain a B.S.W., will aim for an M.S.W., and then gain a license maintained with continuing education units. This framework has limited applicability to many social workers and is certainly a haphazard approach to structuring life long professional education for social workers.

In the workplace there is a trend towards introducing generalist practice by challenging organizational barriers between, for example, TANF, Child Welfare, Mental Health and Adult and Aging Services. Such practices suggest philosophies that make the client the focus of services and interdisciplinary teams the obvious intervention strategy (Tracy, E. & Pine B, 2000). Also, in states where there are shortages of M.S.W. social workers, less qualified personnel are being hired into social work positions. According to the Hartford Study “The Labor Market for Social Workers: A First Look” (Barth and Pho, 2001), in 1999, 30 percent of Social Workers in Child Welfare had only undergraduate degrees and 10 percent had not received any college level education. We need a strategy that combines the desire to change the structure of the social work workplace with the need to take charge of a deprofessionalization process that could make social work education irrelevant to the workplace.

The discussion of a continuum of learning (Anderson, 1985; Gross, 1992; Hoffman, 1992; Raymond & Atherton, 1991) in the past has been framed in terms of the relationship between the B.S.W. and M.S.W. and the progression from generalist to specialist practice rather than the broader ladder and matrix conceptualized here. This paper suggests a “ladder of learning” for social work professionals that begins in high school and continues until the doctorate. This ladder includes levels of education and/or training, job skills that accompany those levels of learning, and various funding and technology needs that would support such a ladder of learning. The ladder would combine education

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1 Ideas for this article were developed in collaboration with the California Association of Deans and Directors of Social Work.

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and training into an integrated, articulated educational progression. The term "training" is used here to describe instruction offered by the various institutions that social work employers have created to provide focused, short term, pragmatic training for social work employees. In some states these are Academies that are networked and separately funded collaborations between universities and employers while in others they are workplace-based, departments of an employing agency. In California, for example, there is a statewide network of Child Welfare training academies that are partnered with local universities, funded by the State Department of Social Services, and coordinated at the state level by the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC), which is based at the University of California, Berkeley. Similar models can be found in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Kentucky.

By combining education and training resources we can identify a ladder or matrix that offers a vision and mission for the social work profession’s campaigns for infrastructures and funding to thoroughly support the needs of the profession.

Such a ladder has been identified in Table 1. It begins at the high school level and suggests a progression to the A.A. degree, post-A.A. Certificate, B.S.W., post-B.S.W. Certificate, M.S.W., with various forms of licensing, and/or Ph.D. The certificate concept introduces the idea that social workers can be on rungs of the ladder at the same time and so are positioned to move up, when ready. Also, the ladder suggests both an upward progression for the career path and at the same time a downward helping hand from those on higher rungs for those who need mentoring and/or supervisory support.

**High School Level**

Current commitments to service learning and community volunteerism in high schools make social work perfectly positioned to encourage certificate training that could lead to a paid position as an "apprentice" human service worker. Such certificate training could be carried out in the high schools in collaboration with training sites and county employers. This would be a way of introducing the social work profession to young people, addressing client needs and supplementing the services offered by TANF employment specialists, human service workers and social workers. The funding stream would come from the schools, collaborating agencies and foundations. There would need to be organizational change in high schools, training schools and employing agencies in terms of structuring curriculum in the school, assigning caseloads in the county and liability issues for both institutions. The social work competencies needed at this stage would involve development of empathy and understanding for clients and the ability to work collaboratively with supervisors. Such students would also be introduced to organizational and community settings and have a beginning understanding of the larger context of such social work interventions. The high school student may well be able to spend protracted time periods listening to and noting client concerns and be able to relate those concerns to organizational and community settings. The certificate would be awarded for basic interpersonal skills with vulnerable clients. These might include interactive skills and social responsibility, cognitive skills and understanding of diversity, and knowledge about oppression, privilege and equity. Clients’ need for human contact would be addressed and the benchmark outcome would be improved client functioning.

In Los Angeles County this model is already being implemented through the "L.A. Human Services Academy" in high schools. The mental health department in collaboration with school districts recruits students in their ninth and tenth grades to work for payment in their junior and senior years and to be mentored in a community college for at least two years while studying human services. Students take one "Introduction to Human Services" course in the high school, receive intensive advising and mentoring and then complete the two-year work program. Thus the program is available to students
# Social Work Professional Education and Workforce Development: A Ladder of Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Rung of Ladder</th>
<th>Description of Rung of Ladder</th>
<th>Funding Sources</th>
<th>Organizational Challenges</th>
<th>Work Skill Sets Graduate Will Have</th>
<th>Client Need</th>
<th>Research and Evaluation of Program Outcomes and Practice</th>
<th>Job Classifications</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>High School Certificate</td>
<td>Schools, State Departments of Human Services, Counties and other employing agencies</td>
<td>The program exists in some high schools and some work settings</td>
<td>Interactive skills, introductory knowledge of theory and practice</td>
<td>Basic human contact and help with everyday skills</td>
<td>Worker's Interactive skills, Client's basic functioning</td>
<td>Apprentice Human Service Worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second (optional)</td>
<td>AA degree</td>
<td>Community College System, State Departments of Human Services, Counties and other employing agencies</td>
<td>Necessity to juggle responsibilities from employers. Need to negotiate &quot;de-professionalization&quot; issues</td>
<td>Introductory intervention skills, some basic assessment, Screening, Interventional Planning under supervision</td>
<td>Transportation; filling out aid applications; information and referral</td>
<td>Worker has assessment skills, Client receives appropriate services</td>
<td>Pre-Social Worker I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third (optional)</td>
<td>Certificate</td>
<td>TANF, State Departments of Human Services, Counties, and other employing agencies</td>
<td>Needs expertise from Universities and Community Colleges. Nip in developed as stop gap for current regional shortages</td>
<td>As above plus knowledge of service delivery systems and community assets and services</td>
<td>Employment and family dysfunction</td>
<td>Worker has mastered of content knowledge and skills and values. Client improves functioning.</td>
<td>Pre-Social Worker II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>BSW</td>
<td>Universities, Department of Social Services, Counties and other employing agencies</td>
<td>Will be increasing demand, therefore, expansion needed</td>
<td>Casework, Community Assessment and knowledge of policy.</td>
<td>Response to crisis situation or chaotic need. Community conditions for community change</td>
<td>Worker understands case management and service delivery. Client improves functioning and connected to resources.</td>
<td>Social Worker One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth (optional)</td>
<td>Certificate</td>
<td>Universities, State Departments of Human Services, Counties and other employing agencies</td>
<td>Support and recognition from employers. Might lead to M.S.W.</td>
<td>Advanced Case Management and community intervention skills.</td>
<td>Appropriate level of services according to severity of problem and specializations.</td>
<td>Worker has more sophisticated case management and community intervention skills. Client improves functioning.</td>
<td>Social Worker Two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth</td>
<td>MSW</td>
<td>Universities, State Departments of Human Services, Counties and other employing agencies</td>
<td>Needs changes by employment and education settings. Need curriculum changes role in definition and salary changes. Changes in CSWE accreditation bodies.</td>
<td>Sophisticated individual and group skills as well as coursework expertise. Supervisory and leadership skills. Able to evaluate practice and understand research.</td>
<td>Specialist interventions with high risk, at all levels of practice. Leadership and Supervision.</td>
<td>Worker able to both intervene with clients and lead programs. Client improved functioning. Agency development.</td>
<td>Social Worker Three</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh: Practice</td>
<td>Various Licenses</td>
<td>Universities, State Departments of Human Services, Counties, other employers</td>
<td>Major reorganization needed. This will probably lead to political battles with Licensing Boards and various social work interest groups.</td>
<td>As above but specialized.</td>
<td>Specialist help by level of severity, field and level of practice</td>
<td>As above in specialist area.</td>
<td>Licensed Social Worker</td>
</tr>
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for six years, four years at high school and two years at the college level. It has attracted foundation funding and qualified for “Zone Academy Bonds” (Source: Testimony at Legislative Hearing on the “Human Services Workforce Shortage” held by Assemblywoman Dion Aroner, at the Sacramento Capitol building, July 17th 2001).

A.A. Degree

The associates degree would be the next step on the ladder for someone with a high school certificate, such as the one described above. This person may be considering a B.S.W. but is uncertain. The A.A. degree would build on the apprentice social worker’s interpersonal skills by giving training in basic interviewing, while informing students about individuals’ family, community and organizational settings. Job Descriptions would include TANF work, family support and homemaker work that includes basic instrumental family assessment and preparation of intervention plans. This work would be carried out with a contextual understanding of organizations and communities. The person in this position with this educational level would be considered “pre-social work” in the same way that, in other professions, we have “pre-law” or “pre-med” programs. Creation of such positions would require collaboration between county and non-profit employers, unions and community colleges. Funding would come from these collaborating entities. Such pre-social workers would provide services to individuals and families, as well as basic financial assessments and would be supervised by a B.S.W. or M.S.W. social worker. Benchmarked client outcomes would include adequate provision of basic subsistence services.

Post-A.A. Certificate

For those who are not sure about continuing and completing a B.S.W, a post-A.A. certificate would be offered by training sites as an incentive that might encourage a pre-social worker to pursue a B.S.W. For example, as noted above, currently in California, there is a state-wide system of public child welfare training academies that provide training for child welfare social workers. Collaborative groups including local university social work departments, county social service departments and the state department of social services administer these academies. The training offered is directly responsive to the needs of the county employees and tends to be of short duration and narrowly focused on specific theories, skills and competencies relating to a particular issue (for example, appreciating diversity, juvenile court, impact of abuse on child development, safety and risk assessment, etc). Training sites such as these could broaden their offerings to a range of fields of social work practice offering courses, for example, in Human Behavior, Social Welfare Policy and Community Organization that constitute a “stand alone” certificate. For this certificate to be effective, it would need to gain acceptance on the university campus through the curriculum review process. This is the first stage of the social work ladder of learning that requires major change in the university culture. The university would need to be willing to put such certificates into the curriculum review process. Once such a certificate had been endorsed by a curriculum review, its courses would be transferable to a B.S.W. Meanwhile, employers and unions would validate the A.A. social worker with the certificate as having a credential that brings an increase in income. Should this pre-social worker choose to continue up the ladder to a B.S.W. their certificate would count towards their degree. Competencies for this pre-social worker would include provision of more intensive, longer-term instrumental and social services to clients. This worker may also begin to understand community and organizational interventions under the supervision of a B.S.W. social worker. Benchmark outcomes would include improved client functioning on instrumental and affective dimensions as well as increased advocacy for institutional change.
B.S.W.

The B.S.W. social worker is already established as offering a generalist social work practice. This is the point in the ladder of learning, where students would develop an overall understanding of the social work role and adopt the professional identity of the social worker. B.S.W. social workers already have an established role in the workplace. In children's services, mental health settings, and hospitals, for example, the B.S.W. social worker does screening, and risk assessment (Levin & Herbert, 1995; Rittner & Wodarski, 1999). This social worker may be a case manager but does not intervene intensively with clients unless supervised by an M.S.W. social worker (Rittner and Wodarski, 1999, Levin and Herbert, 1995). In addition, the B.S.W. social worker has knowledge of community and policy practice. Often, especially in non-government settings, they have community practice responsibilities. This level of the ladder is currently an arena for a struggle between contradictory workplace demands for generalization and specialization. For example, educational practice suggests specialization at the M.S.W. level and generalist practice at the B.S.W. level. However, employers hire B.S.W. social workers in specialist fields of practice such as child welfare or ageing and expect such employees to have specialist knowledge and skills. A clearer articulation of this level of social work and the function of any additional training in the context of this ladder of learning would be timely.

Post- B.S.W. Certificate

Like the post-A.A. certificate, the post-B.S.W. certificate would be a "stand-alone" certificate offered by training sites outside the university setting but vetted by the university curriculum process. This would also be used to encourage the social worker to go on for an M.S.W., since it would include courses that would be transferred into an M.S.W. This leads to the issue of "Advanced Standing." Currently, in many parts of the United States, students with a B.S.W. may be offered advanced standing and, therefore, complete only the final year of the M.S.W. to be awarded an M.S.W. This practice suggests a lack of clarity about the quality of graduate social work education. If the first year of an M.S.W. is indeed equivalent to a B.S.W. education, the logical implication is that, since graduate social work programs are only offering one year of truly graduate education, the M.S.W. only needs to be a one-year program. Anybody involved in M.S.W. education can testify that a one-year program would not prepare social workers adequately for M.S.W. level social work. The ladder of learning offered here gives a framework to articulate more clearly the necessary content of a two-year M.S.W. that is genuinely graduate professional education. The M.S.W. is identified as distinct and separate from the B.S.W.

The B.S.W. social worker is indeed a generalist social worker with basic intervention skills. However, the post-B.S.W. social worker has more sophisticated knowledge and skills and also begins to develop specializations in terms of fields of practice, roles and, perhaps, levels of practice. The post-B.S.W. certificate could focus on case management, community organizing, working with specific populations, or working with specific social problem areas. The role of B.S.W. social workers with a certificate would be to assess and intervene, with M.S.W. social worker supervision, in a particular specialization. Funding streams for such certificates would need to be developed through collaboration between universities and the health and human service agencies. Both would need to see the certificate as an important contribution to the student's educational progress and worth the additional curriculum development and increased salary for such social workers. The universities, in particular, would need to adjust to an acceptance of the role of training sites in post-baccalaureate education.

M.S.W.

The M.S.W. social worker would now be at a higher, leadership level given all the rungs of the
ladder of learning that this social worker would have already climbed. The M.S.W. would now be two years of in-depth education in: approaches to practice, a particular specialty related to a field of practice, or a client group. This in-depth education would explicitly focus on leadership and expertise in all levels of practice skills, supervision skills, training skills and research skills. In the work place, the M.S.W. would be a supervisor, manager, director or expert private practitioner and be able to demand the requisite salary for such a role.

Licensing

The social work license, as it currently stands, does not have a clear, linear position in the ladder of learning so far discussed. Licensing's primary function is not to increase educational knowledge but, rather, to certify that the social worker has the knowledge and skills necessary to intervene with clients. The focus is the protection of the client rather than the educational enrichment of the social worker. If social workers were required to progress through the rungs of the ladder described above, their impact on clients would have been repeatedly assessed and the license would be redundant. However, even if the above structure were implemented, licensing boards are not likely to accept this argument. Licensing would, therefore, still exist as a strategy for consumer protection and would need to be incorporated into the ladder of learning. This could be achieved by requiring universities and training sites to take responsibility for license preparation. There could be various licenses according to level of practice (micro or macro) and field of practice. The license would be seen as a parallel experience to the residency experienced by physicians. There would be supervised classroom and field experiences. The university would administer this education in collaboration with social work agencies that would be seen as "teaching" agencies much like "teaching" hospitals. The benefits of such a collaboration have already been explored and found to benefit students (Hopkins and Mulick, 1999). Of course this would require collaboration between licensing boards, universities, academies and employers with an infusion of considerable resources. In addition, protracted political battles would be anticipated both within and outside the profession. However, with current concerns regarding the model law for social work regulation sponsored by the Association of Social Work Boards (1999), this may well be a timely debate.

Doctoral Education

The linear post-M.S.W. experience in this ladder of learning would be the doctorate. However, this ladder raises questions about the content and function of doctoral programs. The social work doctorate would not only adopt the traditional academic model of a research education but would also expand to require education in a combination of advanced practice and teaching. This is an argument to return to the D.S.W. model but, rather, a suggestion that we strengthen the social work Ph.D. so that it is relevant to both the research needs of the social work discipline and the workforce development needs of the profession. The doctoral level social worker would not only be an academic in a university setting but would also teach and carry out research for all the levels of the social work ladder of learning. This social worker may expand his or her role to training site and "teaching agency" based instruction and research. He or she may also now have a role in providing education for licensing as discussed above. In this way we have Ph.D. social workers who, not only have credibility in the academy but also have strong ties to the social work professional community.

With the major shortage of Ph.D. social workers, expanding their role brings challenges. However, like the proposed M.S.W. social worker, this social worker may take on supervisory and leadership roles in research and education while non-Ph.D. social workers carry out the day-to-day activities. Also, the issue of the Ph.D. shortage leads to consideration of ways of expanding the availability of
Ph.D. education. Traditionally, small group, intensive personal instruction has been considered the only appropriate approach to Ph.D. education. More recently, summer programs and part-time programs have been opened. This and the availability of distributed learning technologies, such as web-based instruction and two-way compressed video suggests that there are strategies for increasing access to doctoral education without lowering educational standards.

Conclusion

Acceptance and implementation of the ladder of learning described above will require considerable long-term planning, convincing interest groups within and outside the profession of the value and need for such an educational and workforce plan, resource development by academic/practice setting collaborations and, perhaps, a miracle! Organizational change needs to be addressed, job descriptions need to be developed, funding sources need to be identified, technological needs must be acknowledged and evaluations of competencies at each rung of the ladder need to be developed. The delivery of such a comprehensive educational experience will require development of various modes and schedules of instructional delivery. Distributed learning via web based courses, CD-ROM and compressed two-way video will need to be integrated with classroom and agency instruction. Face-to-face courses will need to be offered, not only during the weekday, but, also, in the evenings and at weekends. Regional initiatives need to be developed and various demonstration projects need to be proposed to implement this exciting vision of social workers professional future.

Of course, a major implication of developing such a ladder of learning is organizational change within the major social work educational institutional setting, the university. The ladder of learning described here, integrates traditional degrees with certificates and licenses that may or may not be offered by universities. This is not an approach to higher education that would be easily accepted by university curricula processes. However, it is a structure that could provide a high standard of education for social workers. With shortages of Ph.D. social workers, budget cuts and regional shortages of social workers in general, it may well be the right time to make educational reform a priority for social work. Social work educators could expand this debate to challenge the status quo on university campuses while offering a vision and mission of collaboration for higher education. Social work programs can reach out to their local professional communities to partner in campaigning for university reform. In California, a "Master Plan for Social Work Education," based on the ladder of learning, has been written and it can be found at. http://calswec.berkeley.edu/CalSWEC/Masterplan.html A state wide committee has been formed for implementation of the plan that includes, heads of social work programs, county welfare directors, and a senior staffer for a California Assembly member, who is the chair of the California State Assembly Committee for Human Services. This committee is working on specific legislation to implement various rungs of the ladder of learning. Such initiatives give us an exciting vision that social work is well positioned to articulate and implement in many settings.
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