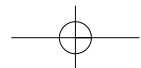
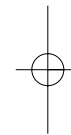
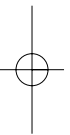


Part One

Introduction

The purpose of this part of the book is to:

- introduce the book as a whole;
- identify its various themes;
- clarify the intended readership of the book;
- introduce various educational features of the text.



1 Social work in challenging times

Mark Lymbery and Karen Postle

Social work in Britain

The future of social work in the context of British society is hard to predict. Social workers will need to accept, and adjust to, periods of intense change in the organisation and management of their work. Practitioners must therefore retain clarity about their role and contribution to welfare services and be prepared to argue for the continuing relevance of their role within environments which they may find harsh and unforgiving. The fundamental changes that have been set in train for social work education confirm the fact that social workers must simultaneously operate in ways that deliver a good quality of service, while also being prepared to amend their practice in accordance with frequent adjustments to their organisational locations.

Although this appears a daunting task, this book argues that it is achievable. However, we are not underestimating the task's intensity, scale or complexity: rather, we suggest that in order to accomplish it practitioners need to identify and adhere to key tenets of social work that have been neglected in recent years. In this way, we can start to transform social work practice and its education. The starting point lies in recognising the breadth of the social work task, well captured in the International Federation of Social Workers' (IFSW) definition of social work, which suggests that it should not be limited to the narrow discharge of statutory functions that has characterised its recent history in the UK:

The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.

(IFSW/IASSW 2000)

4 Social work: a companion to learning

This definition conceptualises the social work role in a broader way than is usual in much practice in the UK: the notion that social work is concerned with ‘empowerment and liberation to enhance well-being’ is not one which accords with the reality of much practice, certainly as regards statutory agencies. However, much social work in developing countries does clearly fall within this general category. Indeed, if we consider the origins of social work within the UK and the United States of America, it is possible to discern such an orientation, particularly in the work of the Settlement Movement (Payne, 2005a). However, one of the things that distinguishes the development of social work in the UK from practice elsewhere in the world is the distance that social work has travelled from its origins (see Chapter 9; implicitly, this thought also underpins the other chapters in Part II).

What we can conclude, therefore, is that the nature and scope of social work practice – as well as its structural location – must be regarded as capable of being changed. The way in which social work has developed in the UK is not a given and does not represent the final stage of its development. The book therefore seeks to enable both students and practitioners to reflect on the circumstances of their work and to consider possible alternatives to the way in which it is organised. While we define these as ‘challenging times’ for social work, we emphatically do not believe that they render good quality practice an impossibility. What the book does seek to achieve, however, is the challenging aim of both enabling students and practitioners to function effectively in current practice contexts, while also providing them with the awareness of critical perspectives that can equip them with a vision of alternative ways of organising, coordinating and carrying out their work. It is certain that the structure of social work will remain untouched unless students, practitioners, managers and academics are able to articulate a reasoned case for substantive change to occur.

The educational and professional framework

In terms of current contexts for practice, there have been many changes to the shape of both qualifying and post-qualifying education for social work. At the qualifying level, significant changes were implemented in the UK from 2003, following years of discussion and negotiation. All social workers are now educated to the level of at least a bachelor’s degree with honours, and all social work courses follow a curriculum combining the Department of Health (DH) Requirements (DH, 2002a), the Quality Assurance Agency’s Subject Benchmark Statement for Social Work (QAA, 2000) and the National Occupational Standards for Social Workers (TOPSS, 2002). These documents have combined to create a ‘prescribed curriculum’ for social work. Most of the new graduates from these revised courses entered the world of social work in 2006.

In 2005, the General Social Care Council (GSCC) published a revised framework for post-qualifying education in social work (GSCC, 2005a), building on changes already incorporated in the revised qualifying programmes. Also in 2005, social work was established as a registered occupation with a protected title. This was after many years of campaigning by social work’s professional body (the British Association of Social Workers); social workers are now required to register with the GSCC. This has two particular consequences:

1. There is now independent scrutiny of the standards of practice and behaviour of practitioners on the register with the possible outcomes that practitioners can be removed or suspended from the register (see Community Care, 2006a).
2. Because employers are no longer the sole arbiters of what counts as acceptable practice, it is possible that what they require of practitioners may be subjected to more scrutiny than before.

Taken together, the requirement that social workers must possess an honours degree in order to enter the profession, the strong encouragement to undertake post-qualification education and training (never previously a characteristic of the occupation) and protection of title all appeared to point towards a positive future for the development of social work in the British context. They are all characteristics of more established professions (Macdonald, 1995), pointing towards an improved status for the occupation of social work.

However, at the same time that these major changes to the professional structure of social work have taken place, the occupation has had to operate in the context of numerous initiatives that have served to constrain the scope of its activities and to fetter the discretion of its practitioners. For example, the promulgation of managerialist thought (Harris, 1998; see also Chapter 22) represents a major challenge for practitioners. At the same time, the emphasis on interprofessional education and partnership working (see Chapters 8, 14 and 20) presents another fundamental test to the way in which social workers operate. In addition, the reconfiguration of child care services that has occurred from April 2006, when combined with an ongoing consideration of the social work role in adult services, will affect the organisational locations within which social workers operate. In some parts of the UK, considerable thought has already been given to clarifying the future social work role (Scottish Executive, 2006). However, the powerful presence of performance measurement in social work (as in most public sector organisations) has also had a major impact upon social work practice and has – arguably, at least – distorted the priorities that govern social services organisations (de Bruin, 2002; see also Chapter 17).

There is an obvious risk that a reductive reading of the *Requirements for Social Work Training* (DH, 2002a) could lead practitioners and educators to ignore the more emancipatory potential of social work. Indeed, the very notion of a prescribed curriculum for social work presupposes that some elements will be included and others excluded. As constructed, this curriculum appears to favour a narrow interpretation of social work roles and functions and downplays the breadth of knowledge and understandings that should characterise the most effective practice. It is particularly worrying that little attention appears to have been given to the impact of poverty and inequality on the lives of people needing social workers' support and to establishing a clear commitment to a positive value base for social work. As a result, this book contains material at its start that addresses these concerns (see Chapters 2 and 3). It is our view that a more positive future for social work can only be secured by the re-establishment of a broader, more critical conception of its possibilities. We also believe that this has the potential to provide a more positive outcome for those people who use social services, an essential outcome if the commitment to service user involvement is to move beyond mere lip-service.

6 Social work: a companion to learning

About the book

Considering this, this book operates on two levels. Written primarily but not exclusively for the British reader, it engages with the key elements comprising the prescribed curriculum for social work training in England – comparable to similar documents applicable in other British countries – providing a critical overview of what is required of social workers in their practice (see Chapters 10–16 in Part Three). However, it moves beyond this to provide an analysis of the political and social contexts within which social work practice takes place, as well as engaging with ongoing themes and debates (see Chapters 2–9 in Part Two). Thus, the book will enable students and practitioners of social work to understand not only how to practise social work effectively but also how to locate this practice within its broader societal context.

The book adopts a critical and questioning approach to its subject matter. It accepts that much of the development of social work in the UK can be contested and points out some of the difficulties that attend its current practice. It can therefore provide a particularly useful resource for students in the later stages of their undergraduate social work training and for postgraduate qualifying students. It is also intended for use by post-qualifying students, in that it addresses issues that are of particular interest to practitioners as part of their professional development (see Chapters 17–23 in Part Four). Similarly, practice teachers will find that the book helps them connect the worlds of theory and practice, while social work lecturers should find elements in the book that can stimulate their teaching and thinking about social work.

A number of educational features have been incorporated into the text. Each chapter contains an introductory section, highlighting the key themes to be addressed. This is balanced by a summary of learning points at the end of each chapter, immediately before suggestions for further reading in a ‘Taking it Further’ section. Another feature of the book is the deployment of questions that encourage the reader to reflect on her/his understanding of the text, relating it to personal or professional experience or both. These inserts, requiring a process of reflection on the part of the reader, are introduced thus:



To what extent does the depiction of social work in this introductory chapter connect to your personal or professional experience?

Students on qualifying courses can use these to help make connections between practice and theory, which can be of value both in relation to the academic – in relation to essays and classroom discussions – and practice elements of the curriculum. Post-qualification, practitioners will find that the text has continued meaning for their experiences within social services agencies and will be of relevance in the world of post-qualifying education and training. Several chapters also include case studies that enable the reader to understand the complexities of the subject matter through the medium of concrete examples.

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The book is organised in five parts beginning with this introductory chapter, establishing the broad scope of the book, placing subsequent chapters in the context of the reform of social work and its education in the UK. The second part is entitled 'Contexts', and contains chapters that examine the perspectives through which social work education can best be understood. The third part is entitled 'Requirements and Processes', and focuses on those elements that should characterise all social work courses, building on concepts identified in the first part and taking account of the 'prescribed curriculum' for social work training (DH, 2002a). The fourth part is called 'Thriving in Practice', and concentrates on what social workers need to sustain productive and fulfilling careers, hence shifting the focus from the qualifying to the post-qualifying levels of education and training. The fifth part contains a chapter summarising learning from the book overall. Each chapter can be read in isolation from the others; however, there are close and direct links between chapters within different parts of the book.

In accordance with the requirement that service users should be considered as central to the delivery of social work education (DH, 2002a) and, by extension, to the whole of social work, two chapters – 6 and 20 – have been commissioned from service user organisations, reflecting a commitment that the experiences and knowledge of such groups of people should be integral to the development of social work. This is also a reflection of the commitment to inclusion and participation that underpins the production of the book as a whole.

There are numerous references to internet sources throughout the text. While all of these references were correct when the book was written, it is possible that websites have subsequently been renamed or discontinued. In such circumstances, we encourage readers to use a reputable search engine to locate the various documents to which reference was made. Any changes to website addresses will be amended in future reprints of this book.

