

Continuing and lifelong education for social work

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Social work education does not start or stop at qualification, or even with social workers. The starting point of all education is people, and thinking about people being educated in professions concerned with helping people, like social work, I think about two aspects of their lives:

- Their pathway into, through and perhaps away from social work; and
- The interaction of their education with the progression of their lives.

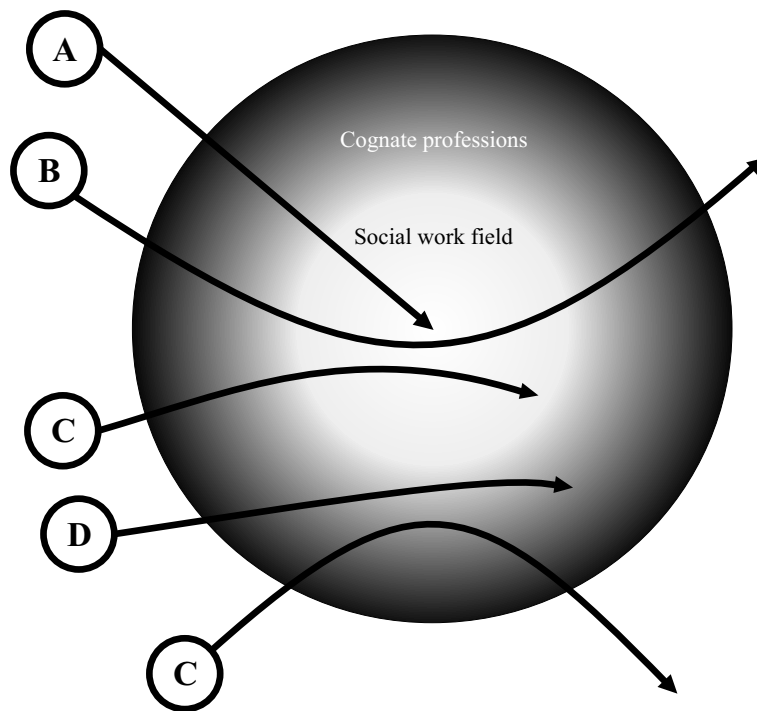
The reason why these two aspects are important is that all education is about progression, about helping people to make progress in their understanding and skill and value development. That progression is bound up with their growth as human beings in their family and social settings. I want first to talk more about this issue about people's pathways through and interaction between life and education. Then, staying with people and the importance of their growth and development as professionals after their qualifying education, I think it is important to provide a learning environment within agencies. This means setting up a system for employing and managing staff that assumes that they will be engaged in learning for their whole life and it means giving them the support, encouragement and motivation to do so. It also means providing a rich variety of opportunities for them to do so, because particular opportunities will only be suitable for some: there have to be alternatives and opportunities for choice. Clearly, as they pursue their roles as professionals, their education starts from where they work and what their work consists of. In talking about that, I will discuss some of the issues that we face in my agency, St Christopher's Hospice.

People's progression through social work

If we picture social work as a field of activity, linked to other professional fields, as in Fig. 1, we can see that there might be a variety of paths into social work education and, perhaps, also away from it. Person A decides on being a social worker, gains a qualification and works in a social work agency. Person B does the same, but decides to move on; through cognate professions, perhaps they become a counsellor for a while, but eventually moves out of the field altogether. Person C moves into social work, but decides to move into a specialised post, so they move towards the borders of social work. Person D never becomes a social worker, but gains training and works in areas close by. Person E works in a cognate profession for a while and moves on. These are some examples, but many different lines of movement are possible.

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Figure 1 - pathways through social work



If we picture someone going through any kind of professional education, as in Fig. 2, we can see that this will take place alongside a variety of life experiences, and a variety of professional experiences. Some of these, like practice learning, may be part of the course, but others, like involvement in policy campaigning, may be quite distant from the course. All of these personal and professional activities will interact with and affect the course. If they are learning while they are in work, people will also have a variety of work activities relevant to and interacting with their education: appraisal, supervision, teamwork, work with colleagues in other professions or roles and induction and updating education – things like how to handle fires if they break out, for example.

One of the purposes and advantages of lifelong education is to allow workers to move around within their profession, and to move between related professions. All welfare regimes contain a range of specialised social work roles, and people can move between them, perhaps following a particular career path, or alternatively, responding to their own personal professional interests. There are different kinds of paths:

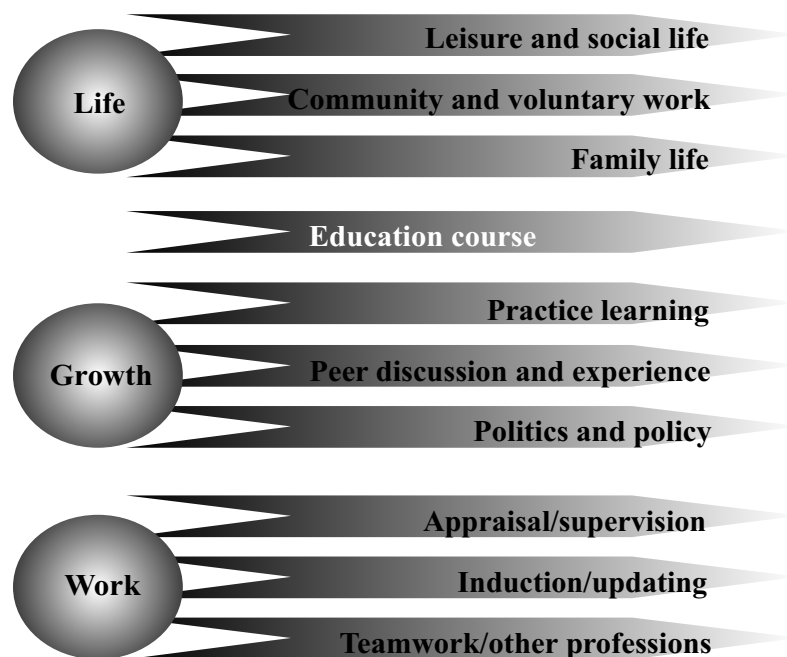
- Between practice, management, policy-making and education;
- Within the same speciality, pursuing different or more specialised roles; for example, moving from general community mental health work, to work in a psychiatric hospital, and

then to work in community mental health rehabilitation or a crisis resolution service.

- Between different specialities, taking particular skills with them; for example, taking groupwork expertise from work with parents and young people, to a mental health setting or perhaps to reminiscence work with elderly people.

- Between different sectors; for example, many social workers in the UK start in general social work roles in the local government social services; later in their careers, they often move to more specialised jobs in the voluntary (charitable) sector, or may seek to operate in the private sector, as independent social workers, taking short contracts with different agencies or for particular work, or to establish their own agencies, such as residential care or specialised treatment facilities.

Figure 2 - Examples of continuing life experience during an education course



Social workers may also move, reflecting changes in the pattern of service. For example, in the UK until recently, work in the community on criminal justice issues has been placed in the probation service. Recently, the government has chosen to emphasise punishment and retribution in the criminal justice system, rather than rehabilitation and social care work with, for example, the families of offenders. As a result, many probation workers who focused on welfare and personal development work with offenders have chosen to leave the service and work elsewhere.

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Therefore, in thinking about and planning continuing and lifelong education within social care, we need to consider both the pathways people are following and the interaction of continuing education with other things that are going on. A full prospectus of continuing and lifelong education might therefore include:

- Prequalification,
- Qualifying, and
- Post-qualification for social workers;
- Agency and professional induction;
- Training for social care workers;
- Multiprofessional training;
- Training for cognate professionals and agencies;
- Public education.

Looking at this list of possibilities draws attention to the need to consider lifelong professional education outside universities or higher education institutions. Social work is internationally considered to be appropriately placed at a tertiary level; the membership criteria for the International Association of Schools of Social Work, for example, requires full members to provide courses that are placed at a level higher than that of school leaving qualification of the country. However, preparation for social work education, education for social care roles and public education may be provided at a range of different levels, and partnership between education and agencies is crucial to pursuing a full range of continuing education opportunities.

Continuing social work education at St Christopher's Hospice

Rather than continuing to discuss this in the abstract, I am going to describe a range of continuing education that involves social work in my own agency (St Christopher's Hospice, 2003).

Some background information first: St Christopher's Hospice is a palliative care service for people who are dying, providing medical and nursing care with 48 beds to alleviate symptoms and manage the disabilities and illnesses of life-limiting illness. It also provides nursing care and medical consultation at home for about 500 patients at any one time. Like much social provision, it is multiprofessional, to integrate a range of professions and services. These include a day care service, with artists and physical care, complementary therapies, such as reflexology and massage, spiritual care both for people who are religious and others provided by chaplains and a social work service and welfare benefits advocacy, to help people sort out their finances, which are often disrupted by serious illness. After death, the social work service and chaplaincy provides bereavement care to families and carers. The Hospice also has an education centre providing courses for its staff, for the locality, nationally and internationally; we are the largest provider of palliative care training in the

world. The principle of our education is that learning about our professional work must be based firmly on practice. Our teaching comes from our doing. Our practitioners are all asked to contribute to our teaching. Our social workers are part of that, in four ways:

- First, internally, they provide teaching that represents social work expertise and viewpoints. For example, much of the teaching on bereavement, groupwork and work with families comes from social workers.

- Second, externally, they provide similar teaching to local professionals and teaching about death, dying, bereavement, grief and palliative care to social work agencies and teams.

- Third, they are part of multiprofessional teams teaching on aspects of practice. For example, internally, a multiprofessional team presents a case for discussion to all clinical staff every two months. The social work members of the team often present the social and family issues involved in the case, and therefore also represent the social work profession and its viewpoints at the case discussions. Externally, a number of courses are multiprofessional and involve each profession. For example, we hold a series of 'clinical masterclasses' in which a recognised expert supported by a group of our staff works together with experienced professionals on current practice issues. The group involved in teaching always includes a social worker.

- Fourth, social workers run courses, mainly aimed at social work professionals on social work issues; at present social workers are presenting training on groupwork with carers and setting up a bereavement service.

Qualifying and post-qualifying education at St Christopher's

Social workers are also involved in a variety of ways in pre-qualifying, qualifying and post-qualifying education (DH 2004a).

At the pre-qualifying level, all social workers contribute to the development of social work by helping people who are interested in the profession and are moving towards it. There is a shortage of social workers, and this has led the government to pursue a public campaign seeking social workers (DH 2004b). The Hospice posters and makes available the publicity, and all social workers from time to time help people who are preparing to go on courses or who are thinking about working in the profession. In particular, the Hospice provides opportunities for many people to volunteer to do practical or other work, and for many people this is a route into professional caring work.

The social work team also supervises students on professional placements, mainly for final placement students. The Hospice more widely takes students in the early parts of their course, where professional social work supervision is not required and most of the learning is about gaining communication skills and understanding agencies in which social work has a role. The Hospice is a particularly interesting setting because, while it contains both social work and social care activities, it also contains many different professions with overlapping roles, and has a complex organisation as a voluntary organisation mainly associated with the national health service.

Because the Hospice does not employ inexperienced social workers, it does not make provision for post-qualification education for people at the beginning of social work careers, where there is a formal system. However, it provides for social work staff to undertake the post-qualifying qualification in practice teaching, so that they may supervise social work students. Because it employs social workers in a specialised setting it expects social workers to gain a specialist qualification. Sometimes this will be a post-qualification masters in social work. However, social workers who expect to remain in palliative care, might undertake a specialist qualification in that field. Other social workers gain advanced qualifications in various forms of therapy, counselling, family work and groupwork. Staff who intend to continue on to management roles might take a masters in management, or in health or social care policy.

Broader careers

If they move into specialised aspects of social work, social workers might have to undertake particular qualifications. One area that is important for the profession is social work education. In the UK, the government's policy is that all teachers in higher education should obtain a teaching qualification. Most university-level institutions require their teachers to do research, and often promotion to leadership positions depends on carrying out research. This is itself increasingly technical, and the UK research boards are increasingly expecting researchers to have undertaken research training. This is usually done as part of a PhD (doctor of philosophy) degree (ESRC, 2004). Thus, someone who sees their career path leading them into social work education, has clear qualification requirements: they will need teaching and research qualifications. In addition to that, within the UK, practice qualification and experience is necessary for most people who are going to teach social work, so they will need to have attained the social work qualification and have undertaken practice for a few years.

Some of the qualifications can be short-circuited. For example, if you take your social work qualification as a masters degree, you will have attained the first stage of a higher degree and gained social research training. If, while you are a practitioner, you take the post-qualifying practice teaching and assessment qualification, you will be regarded as qualified as a teacher, to enter the Higher Education Academy (2004). If you know you are going to set out on this path, you can also begin to do a PhD part-time while practising, researching some aspect of practice, where you will have good access to research opportunities related to practice. There is at present no requirement to complete all these qualifications before your first appointment as a teacher in social work education but often the first period of your work will be taken up by achieving these expectations.

This example makes it plain that having a clear career target and being able to plan your movement towards it may make it quicker and easier to develop your career. But one of the issues is how limiting this may be to a late starter, or someone who wants to change course, having gained experience.

The agency and continuing education

The agency also has an important role in developing its staff and contributing to their continuing education. This task falls into three areas:

- Induction, appraisal and supervision – Every member of staff receives an induction into the organisation. A general programme is offered to all staff, covering the Hospice's structure, strategic plans and policies, to ensure that staff can meet the agency's requirements. Each new member of staff also has an individual programme of meeting people whom they would have contact with during their work, observing the main processes that they will take part in, for example team meetings and case conferences, and opportunities to discuss these experiences. They would then work with their supervisor to set up a work plan for the first six months, at which point there would be a written appraisal of their competence in the main tasks they will have to perform, measured against the requirements in their initial job description. As part of the process of preparing the appraisal, the supervisor would discuss training needs and needs to improve performance in their work. This appraisal, and training plan would be renewed every year thereafter. Regular supervision is provided in groups and individually for all people in the hospice.

- Work experience – An important part of continuing education and lifelong learning is the opportunity to develop new roles. For example, new social workers typically work with in-patients, gaining experience of the social needs of dying people, before moving on to work in the community and work on bereavement. They also have the opportunity to develop special interests in particular issues, such as sexual problems or in techniques, such as groupwork and family therapy. This would also lead to further education.

- Operational training – All staff need operational training on aspects of the Hospice's general work. For example, all staff receive training on the complaints procedure. This is an important way of getting feedback about the quality of services, and preventing dissatisfaction building up among patients and their families. It can also be an important way of responding to psychosocial difficulties. For example, many bereaved people experience guilt that they were not able to care for their relative to their own satisfaction, or are angry about the course of the relative's illness, if it was not diagnosed and treated early, for example. A complaint is sometimes an early sign of psychological difficulties, and if these are addressed quickly and effectively, people can be helped to deal with the emotional difficulties they are going through. Another area is the Hospice's policy for responding to the needs of vulnerable adults. Many adults with serious illnesses or disabilities suffer from physical or sexual abuse, or financial abuse by relatives misusing their money. If they live in nursing homes or are receiving treatment in the Hospice, there is always the risk that they may be abused by untrained or unsuitable staff. All staff are trained to be alert to and to seek help where they come across such difficulties, and there are systems for investigating and taking action to protect people who experience these difficulties.

- Professional training – the Hospice provides a wide programme of short courses, opportunities for trying out other roles. For example, where we have a community vacancy,

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someone working on the in-patient unit might try out the role for a few months, before deciding whether to change jobs. If they decide not to change, this experience is a good basis for career advancement later.

- Career progression – using its appraisal, supervision and work experience is designed to help everyone develop new aspects of their role, to respond to changing needs, or to develop their career. For example, a arts therapist was interested in career progression, but could go no further than a leadership role in his own progression. He was given training and experience that enabled him to take up a more general management role with greater responsibility. Having gained this experience for a while, the Hospice has plans to send him on a management masters qualification, so that he can progress to senior management and eventually to chief executive roles, which he wants, and is considered to be competent to achieve.

Lifelong education continues in after our conventional career. Staff need preparation for retirement: to consider their financial options and to think and plan for the life-changing event when they are no longer employed. In the same way that people often start their careers as volunteers, they may go on to take a voluntary or part-time role after they retire. Perhaps they can use their lifetime's experience in training others, or in writing about the things they have learned in their professional career.

Research and staff development

I previously talked about the importance of research training and experience as part of the development of a career in social work education. However, the Hospice also needs research done into its work, both to improve the service and also to contribute to the development of the field in which it operates. Staff who are interested in this are encouraged and trained in preparing and presenting articles and other publications and in carrying out research. Often they start this work with a more experienced researcher, and as part of projects being undertaken by others. They can also do small pieces of audit or research work on their own practice. For example, an audit of complex cases where we advocated for financial assistance for our patients disclosed a high workload and considerable achievement by the staff involved.

Public education

A further area of work lies in public education. Professional services can never provide everything that people need, and most people prefer to deal with their own problems if they can. The popularity of radio and television programmes and self-help articles, books and problem pages in magazines shows how much people want help in dealing with the problems of everyday life. However, research shows that general education about health and social issues does not have much effect; it is important to target education to groups of people in society who are most likely to have the difficulties, or be able to respond to the need for

help when it arises. For example, our Candle project for bereaved children, most of whom are suddenly bereaved by a parent's death or an friend's accident, provides consultation to teachers and schools who have to cope with the consequences for an individual child, a family, or a class in school.

Partnership

Many of the forms of lifelong and continuing education I have been discussing require partnerships to make them work effectively for the organisation and for individuals. One important partnership in education is between universities and agencies. St Christopher's Hospice has partnerships for validating its courses as part of modular degrees in local universities, a joint masters course in palliative care with a local university taught by university, and a joint post-graduate diploma in childhood bereavement with another university. It also has partnerships in which the Hospice provides placements for students from a wide variety of professional courses, including medicine, nursing, social work and many different kinds of therapy, and it has partnership on research, including joint projects, hosting projects run by universities, helping PhD and other research students to gain access to suitable research subjects, and by setting up contracts for universities to undertake research on our behalf.

Conclusion

In discussing continuing and lifelong education, I have emphasised:

- A learning environment in agencies, that provides a culture of lifelong education, and a rich range of choices;
- Involvement at every stage of formal education from pre-qualification to post-qualification;
- Commitment to education in a range of sectors and to a range of audiences;
- The concept of pathways through a career;
- The importance of planning in advance and through appraisal and supervision;
- The importance of connecting education explicitly with work, life and personal growth;
- The importance of research as an educational and personal development tool;
- The importance of partnerships between education and agencies in delivering a rich environment for lifelong learning in agencies, and opportunities for effective fieldwork during formal education and involvement in practice for university staff and students.

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