



Educating social workers for leadership in a highly differentiated society

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Realization of the 2010 *Social Work and Social Development Conference global agenda* requires social workers to assume leadership. Although there has been acknowledgement in the social work profession that leadership should be taught at all levels of social work education; there is still an apparent lack of social workers occupying leadership roles in the global sphere. This paper argues that when the social work leadership paradigm is not visible in society, the profession is not meeting its purpose. The value of the social work leadership paradigm is potentially strong in all societies. Three examples of teaching leadership in social work education are presented. The elements within each model are discussed. This paper highlights the opportunities in social work education to educate for leadership in social justice and to move past aspirational goals toward a commitment to the promotion of the social work paradigm in global leadership.

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Introduction

Since 1986 when Brilliant (1986) identified the lack of leadership teaching in the social work curriculum, there has been more attention paid to leadership in social work research and education (Rank & Hutchison 2000; McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009). Despite this, Holosko (2009) argues that social work has yet to adequately define the concept of leadership. He suggests that although research has delved into the concept and social work leadership has become a topic for social work education and professional activities; there is still an absence of an agreed upon definition of social work leadership. This is surprising given that leadership has always been an important component of social work, with early practitioners such as Jane Addams and Julia Lathrop taking a central role in the creation and administration of charitable organisations (Austin, 1995; Desrosiers, 2009).

Despite continued debate over the specificities of social work leadership, discussions within the discipline are producing a more clearly defined understanding of the social work leadership paradigm, informed by the values and principles that are the ontological basis of the profession. According to the International Federation of Social Workers (2014), the primary purpose of social work is “to promote social change...social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing” (para. 1). The capacity to engage and build the relationships necessary to achieve change and promote social justice and human rights requires leadership skills and knowledge. Therefore, it is important that social work education nurtures and hones leadership amongst emerging and experienced practitioners. In this paper, we argue for a strong social work leadership paradigm to be part of social work education and continuous professional development. We identify the importance of leadership for the Global Agenda (2010) (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW], & International Council on Social Welfare [ICSW], 2012) and present three approaches to educating for leadership. Firstly, in a qualifying professional social work degree. secondly in an industry program, and thirdly in higher degree research social work education. We conclude with an exploration of how these approaches can make a difference to promoting social work leadership and contributing to the building of a more just society.



Social Work Leadership paradigm

There have been many definitions of social work leadership. These definitions include those from social work professional associations and from educators and researchers. In the USA, the Council for Social Work Education (CSWE) Leadership Institute promotes the importance of leadership (CSWE, 2018). In Australia, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is taking up the challenge of professional development in this area (AASW, 2016). In 2000, Rank and Hutchinson defined leadership as “the communication of vision, guided by NASW Code of Ethics to create proactive processes that empower individuals, families, groups, organisations and communities (p. 499). Vision as a component of leadership was still prominent in 2009 as identified by Holosko’s (2009) content analysis of refereed journals from 1999 to 2002. Based upon his analysis, he identified five core leadership attributes as: Vision; Influencing others to act; Team work/ Collaboration; Problem-solving capacity and Creating positive change (Holosko, 2009, p. 455). What underlies these attributes are both social work’s values and its knowledge base. Meas Nee highlights how empowering individuals to feel confident to think for themselves is a first step to achieving change (Paviour, 2017). Thus understanding of the importance of relationships at all levels contributes to the social work leadership paradigm. Moreover, the value base of social work, which all social workers ascribed to in their code of ethics must be seen as the foundation of a social work leadership paradigm and the power of respect for others and social justice could provide a strong framework which is missing in global leadership today.

Social Work Global Agenda – the need for leadership

In 2010, over 3000 social work practitioners, educators, and development workers met to establish an agenda for social justice and social development. In particular, the agenda called upon practitioners to strengthen advocacy “for a new world order which makes a reality of respect for human rights and dignity and a different structure of human relationships” (IASSW, 2014, p. 54). The agenda contains four key areas: *Promoting Social and Economic Equalities* (2012-14); *Promoting the dignity and worth of the person* (2014-16); *Working towards environmental sustainability* (2016-2018), and *Strengthening recognition of the importance of human relationships* (2018-2020). Emphasis on ensuring an appropriate environment for practice and education was present throughout. The Global Agenda Observatory (IFSW, IASSW, & ICSW, 2012) is the mechanism for monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the Agenda Commitments. It consists of regional networks or consortia



composed of institutions of higher education and professional/ practice-based organisations that jointly research, analyse, synthesise and report on Agenda activities. The agenda was strong on the need for integration of theory and practice and empowerment but less forthcoming on how leadership can contribute to the agenda. Yet without leadership, such a wide-ranging and international policy and practice agenda will be difficult to achieve.

Why is social work leadership important?

Many writers have highlighted the purpose of social work and its values and principles as requiring leadership to be an integral part of social work (Rank & Hutchison, 2000; Holosko, 2009; McDonald & Chenowith, 2009; Lawler, 2007). Social work has been described as a doing profession and the principles of social justice and empowerment have to be more than aspirational. Working towards a just and equal society has to be the purpose which drives social work whether or not the task is at an individual client level or at the macro level. Research (Fairtlough, 2016; Rank & Hutchison, 2000) supports the conclusion that social workers prefer transformational leadership. Transformational leadership (Bass, 1985; Gray, Field, & Brown, 2010) includes modelling a vision and promoting intellectual stimulation. It is encouraging that this is what social workers are looking for in a leader – what we do not know so well is how the social workers advance leadership themselves. Most of the research on leadership has focused upon social work leadership in organisations. Focusing on leadership in organisations and presenting managers as leaders is useful to demonstrate leadership roles in social work. However, this also carries a risk that only formal leadership roles are identified and thus leadership at all levels is not well understood. In reality, leadership can occur at in a variety of roles, and should not only be seen as the domain of advanced social work practitioners.

Cultural influences on social work leadership

Just as the implementation of social work is influenced by context; so it is with leadership. Leadership studies in social work have largely been within the western tradition. Leadership theories are also drawn from the western tradition. Yet studies of leadership in Indigenous communities have shown different approaches to leadership. For example, in Indigenous communities, the role of Elders in providing guidance to communities and their approach to doing



this highlights the importance of culture. The respect given to the Elders by the community promotes their role as leaders.

Culture presents a challenge to an international social work paradigm as the cultural context will influence what is looked for in leadership. According to Euwema, Wendt and Van Emmerik (2007), culture has an influence on leadership in teams, however the extent of the influence is less where there is supportive leadership and more when there is directive leadership. This suggests that leadership guided by social work values which are respectful and supportive may not look too different across cultures.

Ways of learning

As the teaching of social work leadership has been introduced into qualifying social work curricula, it is puzzling as to why the take up of leadership roles has been low in many areas. Moreover how students experience learning leadership has not been studied. Years ago, Sommers (1969) a social work educator highlighted how learning is done by the learner, not by teachers transmitting what they know. The teacher's role is to present the material and to motivate the individual to learn. Perhaps there needs to be greater focus on the students' motivation to undertake leadership and creation of opportunities for students to critically reflect upon areas for change for which they have particular concern. Encouraging students to play an active role in advocacy and social justice initiatives needs to have a greater emphasis in teaching leadership if students are to development a commitment to influencing change. When young people are passionate about political and social issues, they engage in meaningful action. For example, thousands of young people took on leadership roles in the 2008 US presidential election, working at the community level and proving their capacity to motivate people to register and vote for Barack Obama under the "I can" call.

Method

This paper draws upon three education models for teaching leadership to better understand how leadership skills and knowledge can be promoted within the profession. The first model is the Leadership in Social Work subject (LSW) which is delivered to undergraduate and masters' by coursework students in the final year of their qualifying social work degree. The second is the Diploma in Child and Family Practice Leadership (DCFP), an industry-based program which was



developed to support experienced practitioners to develop and strengthen their leadership skills. The third program is a social work higher degree research program and we discuss how that contributes to the leadership agenda in social work. These case vignettes demonstrate how the student participants engage with their own motivation to learn and identify the existing knowledge they bring to the learning situation which promotes a keen interest in leadership and in recognition of the value of leadership. Each of the programs described is designed to build upon the students' knowledge, motivation and passion. The first vignette includes reflections from one of the authors who was a student participant in the subject.

Leadership in social work education: How do we motivate beginner and experience practitioners to engage in leadership and enact and promote social change?

Teaching leadership in a qualifying social work degree.

At La Trobe University the qualifying social work degree has a focus on the development and application of social work knowledge and values. The social work discipline has developed a vision which guides its teaching, research, scholarship and community engagement. It sees social work as the catalyst for building a more equitable society. According to the university, “the Vision of the Department is to be a catalyst in building a more equitable society through engaged scholarship, teaching and community connectedness” (La Trobe University, 2012, p. 11). In particular, the program has a strong emphasis on human rights and social justice. This permeates the curriculum.

The teaching method is a variation of enquiry-based learning (Deignan, 2009). Thus the final subject in the course is a capstone subject. In this subject, Leadership in Social Work, the focus is on the students' integration of social work values, knowledge and skills. The subject curriculum builds upon and expands the learning outcomes specified in the qualifying course. The subject aims to assist students to use their values, knowledge and skill to take roles of leadership in the profession and the community.

The subject addresses the role of the social worker as a leader and agent of change. Students explore the role of social work in the community and how social workers have addressed barriers to inequality and promoted social justice in their areas of practice and beyond. There is a national and international focus on social workers as leaders. Students are assisted to understand how



various types of leadership can influence change and promote social justice and professional practice. Different types of knowledge are identified and critically examined to assist students to consolidate their confidence in critically analysing knowledge.

Students are encouraged to reflect on themselves as leaders, to identify their own preferred styles of leadership, and to understand the dynamic nature of leadership, and the impact of context on effective leadership. The relationship of this understanding to continuous learning in their professional life is highlighted. The subject builds upon the students' philosophical, theoretical and practice learning. It is taught concurrently with field education units.

A key element of this subject is a leadership conference which is held at the conclusion of the subject. For this conference, each student is required to choose a topic which they feel passionate about and want to bring about change to create a more just or equal situation. Selection of a topic facilitates the students' exploration of leadership across a diverse range of cultures, practice areas, and client groups.

At the conclusion of the subject, students report an increased commitment to and interest in leadership. Sample 1 (at paper's end) presents the feedback from one of the authors who was a student in this program.

An Industry program - Graduate Diploma in Child and Family Practice Leadership

The Graduate Diploma is an industry-based program which was initiated by the Department of Human Services in Victoria. The program is focused upon developing leaders in child and family practice. Student participants are experienced practitioners who are motivated to continually improve their practice and to take leadership roles. The students admitted to this program are those who are already demonstrating good practice and leadership in their professional endeavours. The program builds upon their current knowledge introducing the latest research and encourages students to test its application in their practice. The program instructors ensure that the material presented is relevant to current practice. The instructors model transformational leadership in their individual concern for students. There is a strong Aboriginal cultural input in the leadership and practice components through a partnership with the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency. Assessments are designed to facilitate the students' demonstration of practical and



theoretical learning and to relate to the participant's work. The evaluation of this program provided evidence of students moving into new leadership positions and their performance being noted by managers as demonstrating leadership skills (Frederico, Long, McPherson, McNamara, & Cameron, 2016).

A Social Work Higher Degree Research Program

For all professional disciplines, a key area for leadership and development is through research. Higher degree research training is both research and leadership training. Myers (1967) stated that the true test of a university was the difference its graduates made to the wellbeing of society. Higher degree students have a particular responsibility to contribute to positive development in society. The intent of social work research is underpinned by the values which frame practice, in particular a concern and attempt to address "issues relating to disadvantaged, oppressed or socially excluded groups" (Smith, 2012, p. 446). Research informs practice through the continued development of the discipline's knowledge base. It enables practitioners to understand and assess the needs of individuals and communities, and assess and improve upon interventions that lead to meaningful change both for individuals and the policies and systems which impact our societies (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2013).

For social work higher degree students, leadership is demonstrated through their commitment to develop the knowledge base required for social work to contribute to a more just society. However, operationalising the commitment requires moving from knowledge development to knowledge translation. Social work researchers have a responsibility to ensure that the knowledge obtained is disseminated and utilised for the benefit of society. It is contended by the authors that far too much knowledge development in social work rests in journals and is not always implemented for the benefit of society.

Discussion

In 2000, Rank and Hutchinson identified that leadership needs to be taught at different levels of social work education. This approach is supported by Holosko (2009), McDonald and Chenoweth (2009), the AASW (2016) and the CSWE (Lazzari, 2007) amongst others. The three examples presented showcase leadership education in distinct spheres: qualifying social work programs, industry, and higher degree research programs. Each of these levels of social work education



provides a significant opportunity to engage participants in leadership. In each, the five elements of leadership identified by Holosko (2009) were integrated. We argue that for students to learn these components adequately they have to be motivated to envision their own capacities to lead. The underlying philosophy of each of these examples is recognition that to stimulate what motivates the students as learners they need to feel engaged in the topic. Furthermore, students need to recognise and feel confident in applying their existing knowledge and skills for the purpose of leadership. Processes of individual self-reflection are a core method for supporting students in identifying their own motivation to make a difference and assume leadership positions. Leadership is required in social work practice for individuals, families and communities. In other words, the vision of what is required for a just society has to come from the student themselves in the first instance. Theories of leadership and knowledge and skills to be effective as leaders are essential components to be taught. Integrating the teaching of leadership at all levels of social work education allows for continuing development of leaders.

Conclusion

There is a dearth of strong, value-based leadership in the world today. Values of respect and social justice whilst held by many people in all communities often do not seem to be evident on the world political stage. Our argument is that increasing the visibility of the social work paradigm will contribute to the promotion of social justice in the community and the building of a just society. However, if social workers do not know the social work leadership paradigm nor feel commitment to leadership for change it is almost impossible to promote it in the community. This impacts on the degree of success of the profession achieving its purpose in the community. Inspiring social workers to undertake a leadership role and to recognise their own potential as leaders will add to the voices for social justice. In this paper, we have highlighted educational approaches for teaching social work in a way which promotes engagement in leadership in social work. The response of the participants to this teaching of social work leadership has been positive within these three models. Feedback from participants in each program demonstrates a heightened interest in leadership and for some a taking up of leadership roles. Establishing knowledge of how social work leadership is taught and how learners can be successfully engaged in leadership at all levels can contribute to increasing the visibility of the social work paradigm; and thus, provide another pathway for operationalising the purpose of social work.



The value of social work leadership education: A student's perspective

I completed my Master of Social Work at La Trobe University in December 2017. While undertaking my second placement at an Aboriginal women's service, I was also enrolled in the *Leadership in Social Work (LSW)* subject. Prior to taking this subject I had not given much thought to leadership. Much of the social work curriculum is focused on theoretical and practice models, and specific fields of practice. Sometimes it can feel as if you are 'going through the motions' or memorizing and retaining abstract concepts. It can be difficult to grasp how what are you learning will come to be applied when you enter the field. LSW motivated me to critically reflect upon my existing skills and knowledges, and consider how I might utilize these to engage in social change.

The importance of social work leadership

Learning about social work leadership broadened my understanding of social work theory and practice, and as a beginning practitioner, professional possibilities. Social service organisations are currently in the midst of a great deal of institutional instability as we respond to the disappearance of the traditional Keynesian welfare model of redistribution and equality (McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009). As we bear witness to the impacts of these changes upon individuals, social workers have an important leadership role to fill in theorising and implementing strategies to mitigate the impacts of governmental retreat from the promotion of social justice and human rights (McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009). Social work leadership is distinct from leadership in other professions due to its emphasis on a systemic perspective that responds to complex social problems, and its underlying commitment to promoting empowerment at individual, family, and community levels (Rank & Hutchison, 2000). The Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW] (2016), defines leadership "as a process of social influence...it is about vision, about people endorsing and supporting, about empowerment, and most of all, about producing useful change" (p. 3).

Skills and knowledge for social work leadership

The *Leadership in Social Work* course was an opportunity to hone in on my specific social work interests and consider how I could put my skills and knowledges to use in addressing some of the inequalities and injustices I witnessed whilst on placement. Positioning oneself as a leader in this field of practice as a non-Aboriginal social worker brings with it specific challenges due to the historical and contemporary context of relations between Aboriginal communities and non-Aboriginal social workers. We cannot ignore the role that social work itself has played in undermining the human rights of Aboriginal peoples and communities (Bennett, 2015). These factors only strengthen the need for leadership within social work to ensure that all practitioners are working in a way that promotes individual and community well-being for Aboriginal peoples. The course provided a useful platform, as well as the frameworks and skills, for thinking through issues related to positionality, diversity and power within social work.

Leadership conference

One of the most valuable components of the course was the Leadership Conference. While we had given individual and group presentations throughout the course, the Conference was the first time in the past two years, that as students, we were able to choose a topic that we were passionate about and communicate our theory of change to fellow students and faculty. I spoke with many other students who felt that the interactive and supportive environment of the Conference instilled a great deal of optimism as students prepared to transition from student to professional life. It was also an opportunity to learn about the diversity of practice settings and interests among our cohort.

Sample 1 Reflection of a participant in LSW

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