



HEHD POLICY BRIEF

Social Work Education and Professional Wellbeing In South Africa

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About this brief:

This brief considers the wellbeing role of university education. It particularly focuses on what social work education can do in advancing professional wellbeing, which is integral to effective public-good services. The brief is addressed to educationists, social services practitioners, researchers and policy makers who are concerned about sustainable human development and social wellbeing.

Research Problem

Social work education is important in addressing questions of social and human development. As an academic field of study and a profession, social work is widely understood to be a discipline that promotes social change, development and empowerment of disadvantaged people. Consequently, social work education focuses on the attainment of knowledge and competencies to accomplish these goals. However, recent studies across various contexts have shown that social workers' wellbeing achievement or lack of it affects their ability to contribute towards sustainable social, economic and human development. This is even more marked in a context like South Africa where social workers often function with very few resources and in contexts of extreme poverty. Using the capability approach, this qualitative study therefore critically examined how social work education can enhance the achievement of professional wellbeing.

Methodology

This brief is based on a cross sectional, qualitative study that was conducted at one South African university in 2017. Data on what constitutes professional wellbeing and the role social work education ought to play in advancing it was collected through interviews with seven lecturers, ten fourth year students and eight practising social workers. The interviews were complemented with documentary review, including social work curricula, and SAQA and CHE standards documents.

Research Aim, Objectives and Questions

The research aimed at critically investigating how social work education can enhance professional wellbeing using the capability approach as a conceptual frame. Its objectives were: 1) to examine what social workers and prospective social workers regard as constituting their own wellbeing; 2)

explore and highlight social work students and practising social workers' aspirations; 3) identify the contextual factors that enable or constrain the development of social workers' professional wellbeing and aspirations; and, 4) to review how social work education can create opportunities (capabilities) for social workers to make both personal and professional choices, and expand their aspirations and wellbeing.

Key Findings

The findings suggest that professional wellbeing is plural and integral to effective public interventions. Social workers define professional wellbeing in terms of the following intersecting functionings (achievable being and doings that they value): effective helping, professional growth, personal growth, as well as material achievements. The findings also show that various structural, organisational and personal factors influence the extent to which social workers can achieve these functionings. Factors such as the country's extreme and persistent poverty and inequality levels, resource constraints and a lack of supportive supervision, among others, limit achieving valued functionings by social workers.

The study thus extrapolated the following multidimensional capabilities as key for sustainable professional livelihoods: 1) affiliation, 2) adaptation, 3) self-care, 4) work-life balance, 5) reflexivity, 6) knowledge and skills, and 7) values and principles.

The research highlights the need for a professional education that goes beyond only addressing questions of employability and human capital to expansively fostering human development. It underscored the importance of moving beyond viewing social workers as a means to social development, to seeing them as ends of development whose wellbeing ought to be advanced in and through university education.

Recommendations for social work services organisations and policy makers

Drawing from the results of this work, recommendations for social work services organisations and policy makers in South Africa are suggested:

- Working towards improved work environments for social workers.
- If possible, ensuring adequate staffing and resources.
- Introducing, implementing and safeguarding effective work-life balance policies and practices, for instance, ensuring flexible work schedules for social workers, work arrangements such as maternity and paternity leave among others.
- Ensuring proper and adequate supervision for social workers, as well as encouraging all supervisors to undergo training.
- Upgrading reward systems as well as salaries for social workers.
- Opening up opportunities for, and prioritising, continued education or professional development.
- Promoting informal interactions among social workers.

Similarly, policy makers should consider the following:

- Ensuring the implementation of social welfare policies.
- Lobbying for improved and better funding for social welfare services.
- Advocating for the advancement of professional wellbeing through education as well as within social service organisations.