PERSPECTIVES ON THE COMMUNITY EDUCATION MODEL OF SOCIAL WORK AS A RESPONSE TO GLOBAL RISK ISSUES: IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION AND PRACTICE

INTRODUCTION

Society's prevailing ideology – whether it is focused largely on personal troubles or public issues or somewhere in-between – is mirrored in the priorities of social work and its methodologies. This paper reflects on the priorities of social work in terms of global risk issues and community education as a methodology. The mission of social work has always included a people-focused development philosophy that is proactive and preventative in its approach to addressing present and anticipated. This people-focused development philosophy is based on the assumption that all people should have access to goods, services, opportunities, decision-making processes and. In such a context, it follows that there will always be a common educational component in social work, since education in some or other form will occur when information is offered to communities.

The idea of community education is nothing new in social work. In South Africa, for instance, community education is presently widely utilised as a model for community work by practising social workers. Recent research has shown that in the North-West Province of South Africa the community education model is employed as a primary model by social workers in community-based organisations in 72,4% of the community work projects of the investigative group concerned. Although the statistics of one province in South

Africa cannot simply be globally generalised, it does give an indication that community education is being utilised to a significant extent in practice, particularly with regard to issues that are common throughout the world. This has implications for the education of social work students and for social work practice in general.

The aim of this paper is to construct perspectives on community education as a model of community work by unpacking the knowledge of community education that exists in social work, and packaging it in the context of social work's response to contemporary global risk issues, in order to identify implications for education and practice. It is done by motivating the addressing of risk issues by means of community education, exploring the roots of the community education model, examining the relationship between community development and community work, analysing the theoretical foundation of the community education model, and by conceptualizing an ideal type of community education. Core concepts of community education arising from these contexts are also elucidated.

RISK ISSUES

As the links between countries become closer and more complex, the issues and concerns that affect one region of the world become the concerns of everyone, everywhere. For the purposes of this paper it is impossible to provide a comprehensive and systematic coverage of the world's pressing issues, since global risk problems can vary from Aids, poverty, economic, social and political concerns to environmental and security matters. With reference to addressing risk issues it is obvious that developmental and economic paradigms have thus far failed to eradicate the ailments of the world. As social work is a profession that responds to society, there should be within the social work context a continuous search for models, methods and processes with which to address

contemporary risk issues. Familiar technology ought to be revaluated to fit in with contemporary developments. In this connection the question asked by Max-Neef (1991: 16) is especially relevant: How can one determine whether one development process is better than another? In this paper it is not suggested that community education is a better or more effective model with which to address risk issues, but it is true that the acquisition of knowledge, values and skills by people in the community has always been the foundation of all human development. Community education is at the heart of human development and has played a vital role throughout the history of social work.

THE ROOTS OF THE COMMUNITY EDUCATION MODEL

Every society at every stage of development has devised ways and means of providing services for those in need. In the western world, Settlement Houses emerged after Charity Organization Societies. Rather than looking to individual character as the root cause of social problems, Settlement House leaders typically saw environmental factors as being responsible for the conditions they deplored. In everything they undertook, Settlements tried to help their neighbours develop their potentialities to the fullest. There was great emphasis on education of all kinds.

In other parts of the world, for example in traditional Africa, social needs and problems are handled by the family, both immediate and extended. Non-formal education from generation to generation has, therefore, been part of man's social existence. This refers to education whose practices were not trapped between walls. The community, the world and life were "the school" and the education thus derived lasted all life long. People collectively generated their own defining knowledge and developed skills that enhanced societal needs. However, over time, the state gradually assumed a greater role as the principal source of social

provision. Modern society had become so complex that state intervention in social welfare developed logically as a universal phenomenon.

The idea of community education can be traced back to mass adult education and literacy initiatives. In many respects community education was the forerunner of community development. It is thus globally acknowledged that community education is central to development and that it is one of the priority long-term solutions to provide the necessary capacity and conditions for sustainable social development. Social work, as one of the core professions within the social welfare field, plays a pivotal role in the attainment of community development goals. In order to explain the latter statement it is necessary to make clear the relationship between community work and community development.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMMUNITY WORK AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

In this paper, the traditional approach to the relationship between community work and community development will be followed. Community development is seen as an umbrella concept to refer to the conscious efforts of change agents that are aimed at realizing objectives within various spheres of community life. The concept community work is used in a narrower sense and refers specifically to the method used by social workers to bring about changes that are particularly beneficial to the social sphere of community life. That implies that the social worker facilitates the process of learning, growth and development. The focus is on facilitating the development of people and not on the development of things. Development strategies are not pre-planned from outside the community, but with and alongside the community within a people-centred paradigm, through sharing and mutual learning with the community.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF THE COMMUNITY EDUCATION MODEL OF SOCIAL WORK

The analysing of theoretical models is a valid foundation to structure activities in community work. Rothman & Tropman's three models of community organization practice according to selected practice variables, namely locality development, social planning and social action, are generally accepted as a sound theoretical foundation in community work. Similarly, Weil & Gamble's eight current models of community practice for social work define community practice, clarify its domain, and illustrate its diversity. In both models education as a worker's role is implied. Popple identifies six models of community work practice, and specifically also community education as a model. The purpose of community education is described as bringing education and community into a closer and more equal relationship.

Weyers (2001) identifies five models of community work from a South African perspective. They cover community development, social planning, social marketing, social action and community education. The author operationalises each model in a practical way, thus also the community education model that is utilized to equip community members with the necessary knowledge, insight and skills to function optimally in the community.

The starting point in assessing an optimum practice mode at any given time is to identify key or fundamental variables. Variables inherent to the previously mentioned models of community education can be identified in the following way: the community's relationship to the power structures that impact upon them; community circumstances; needs, problems and strengths in the community; and the basis on which workers are involved. These variables are accepted as the foundation for the community education model of social work and are integrated into the further discussion.

One can therefore agree with Weil, Rothman & Tropman that a model is not intended to signify a "boxed in", isolated or fixed approach with impermeable boundaries, and that models can be "mixed and phased" to be most effective in a current situation or stage of organizational or community development. It is illustrated by the different aspects of community education that fit into various approaches. In this regard three approaches of the community education model can be distinguished, namely the civil and social education approach (where communities are enabled through non-formal and informal learning experiences to function as "responsible citizens"), the life skills approach (where the focus is on life skills) and the learning skills approach (where the focus is on literacy) .

The theoretical underpinning of the community education model can be utilized to construct an "ideal type" of community education to interpret and respond to contemporary social issues. One may therefore ask: What is the ideal type of community education?

THE IDEAL TYPE OF COMMUNITY EDUCATION

The social worker's role as educator is comprehensively described in literature that focuses on general social work practice. Miley, O'Melia & DuBois (2002: 18-20) describe education as a function of social work. They distinguish various education roles of the social worker, amongst others the teacher role, the trainer role and the outreach role on micro-, mezzo- and macro-level. These authors regard education as inherent in all other social work activities even though education is identified as a separate function. Furthermore, they believe that education requires an empowering information exchange between a client system and a social work practitioner. They emphasize the fact that the education function of social work respects the knowledge and experience that all

parties contribute. On a macro-level these roles of the social worker are directed mainly towards increasing awareness of social issues and early prevention.

Homan concurs by regarding education as only a part of other methods, that has to be augmented in order to motivate people to act in a meaningful manner. The author also sees community education as a typical form of community activity and as a basic means for assisting the community by bringing matters to the community's attention and preparing them for knowledgeable action. Homan postulates that although education is a precondition for action, it is not action as such. Having knowledge of something does not guarantee that action will be taken. The author warns that when education becomes the goal during intervention, social workers may be inclined to think that the knowledge that has been conveyed is sufficient for corrective action by the community. In connection with the goals of education Henderson and Thomas refer to process goals that include educational aims, and focus on growth or maturity in civic affairs, rather than on solving a particular problem or meeting a special need.

The views on education of various authors embrace the aforementioned argument. It is thus important to avoid simplistic conclusions regarding education which suggest that a single dose of education will resolve social problems. In this connection education is regarded as lifelong learning that is an integral part of people's lives. Lifelong learning can be regarded as non-formal education, a concept that is used to describe any educational activity outside the established formal system. It is, therefore, an open-ended process that may never be completed.

Lifelong learning corresponds to Freire's (1972) postulation of "popular education" that was conducted outside the formal education system. Freire advocated problem-posing education, which stressed communication and

partnership in learning. This idea of community education is therefore viewed from a people-centred perspective that entails, inter alia, that people learn together and from one another instead of being taught/trained through adult or community education programmes by "experts'.

Non-formal education is an important technique of social work and has a part to play in the process of consciousness raising. In this view, conscientization facilitates the creation of the will to change, which is an essential ingredient of community involvement. The extensive work of Freire centres on conscientization. Freire believes that educators have to work on a range of experiences brought by people. The educational process entails providing opportunities for people to validate their experiences, culture, dreams, values and histories. Conscientization is a participatory, collective, action-reflection process that can only occur through "renaming the world" and dialogue. Education for conscientization is therefore the antithesis of "banking education", where members of the community are regarded as "empty vessels" and the social worker as the "depositer" who stuffs as much information into the "receptacles" as possible.

Therefore, community education entails facilitating and sharing existing and collective knowledge and skills, or acquiring knowledge and skills in a way decided upon in collaboration with the community. The community is involved in what is being learnt and how they want to learn, based on the "core business" of community education, namely the elimination of the disempowering effects of ignorance, by improving the literacy and skills level of communities. Education generated through literacy should not be privileged over that from the oral tradition. Literacy and skills must, however, be viewed in a greater context. Literacy refers to "power of knowing" and skills to "the ability to do or to

influence". The context of literacy can vary from academic literacy, economic literacy, environmental literacy to civil literacy.

The connection between literacy and oracy go together with the culture and indigenous knowledge of a specific environment. Education for sustainable development should face the challenge of drawing the best from existing indigenous paradigms that are relevant to current needs. This implies that community education should reflect insight into the inextricable link between education, culture and the economy. This means utilization of relevant communication technology and the development of indigenous education systems for an emancipatory practice. Education should have a cultural component which specifically draws upon indigenous knowledge and culture. However, the question here is: Will the dominant culture mould and shape indigenous practice or will the diversity of cultures be accommodated? Or will it be a case of "civilizing the savages" and "educating the primitive"? To be relevant in an appropriate local context and to merely be "doing good social work" are ways in which a social worker can respond. All the activities, ideas, processes, and techniques of the social worker must capture the socially constructed reality of a given society as it relates to its own social experience, shared images, social stock of knowledge, and institutional framework.

CORE CONCEPTS OF COMMUNITY EDUCATION
Certain core concepts regarding community education have come to the fore in the preceding discussion. Core concepts are abstract ideas that are generalized from particular situations. They are expressions of basic elements in a few summarizing words. When used in reference to fields such as community change (or as in this paper in terms of community education) "they take on some of the qualities of 'practice principles' with potential to integrate information about 'thought' and 'action' in a new combination". The most

important core concepts flowing from community education, namely participation, empowerment, strengths, assets and capital, will now be discussed.

Participation

The role of civil society in development is crucial. If developmental work is imposed from outside, there will be no sustainable and human development. When development increases local levels of social capital, communities develop the capacity to help themselves. The involvement of communities should take cognizance of the fact that the pace developed by the community may seem slow to the outsider, yet the pace permits the adaptation to change. Participation should not be confused with involvement, because it is not about involving the community in what workers think they should get involved in, or how and who should get involved. The concept of participation refers to sharing and working together (in terms of community education), which gives all people in the community an equal opportunity to have a part in the process of making decisions that affect community life.

Empowerment

Empowerment is commonly viewed as a process that operates on a single level of practice. However, there is an emerging tendency to see empowerment as a process with multiple levels such as individual involvement, organizational development and community change. Empowerment does not literally mean that power is handed down or given to people. To empower means to enable people and to elicit and increase their power by various means. It is an act of skill and confidence building and should be developed through cooperation, sharing and mutual learning .

Strengths

The strengths perspective is based on the assumption that individuals in communities have strengths, assets, and expertise born of lived experience. The social worker needs to identify, facilitate or create contexts in which people in communities who have been silenced and isolated, gain an understanding of, a voice in, and influence over the decisions that affect their lives. Thus healing, belonging and relationship building through dialogue and collaboration are promoted. The usual focus on the needs of people carries the risk of ignoring their substantial strengths that make them dependent upon the practitioner who defines their capacity. Emphasis on the deficits of communities can cause them to lose confidence in themselves and may result in "learned helplessness". The emphasis is thus on what everyone already knows and not what everybody needs to know. This perspective should be recognized and actively engaged in community education so that communities will not remain mere consumers of services, but will be capable of developing into producers of knowledge.

Assets

Assets and strengths are closely connected and are sometimes used in the same context. Both of these concepts are a reaction to a needs-based approach. However, an asset could be anything that is utilized and shared to the benefit of others, and could therefore include strengths. In terms of community education, community members or "clients" are regarded as experts of their own context and their viewpoints are essential to any education that occurs. The social worker does not simply provide a service to the community, but connects people to assets and therefore does not maintain an authoritative and paternalistic approach towards the community, but is supportive and acts as a partner in all community affairs.

Capital

With regard to community education, capital can be regarded as "...learning as a process whereby people build up - consciously or not - their assets in the shape of human, social or identity capital, and then benefit from the returns on the investment in the shape of better health, stronger social networks, enhanced family life, and so on". Social capital refers to various social factors, such as norms and networks that enable people to take collective action to contribute to well-being. Human capital refers to the knowledge and skills possessed by individuals and which enable them to function effectively in economic and social life. Education can play a part in enabling individuals to sustain their individual identity capital within the local or national identity. These concepts namely human, social and identity capital, are vital factors at almost every stage of the learning process. These concepts are part of the outcomes of learning and are major determinants of motivation, whether or not people choose to engage in learning.

PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNITY EDUCATION AND THE RESULTANT IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND PRACTICE

To achieve the objectives of this paper, 12 perspectives on community education, which have been constructed from the foregoing theoretical exposition, are presented. Each perspective is followed by resulted implications for social work education and practice.

Perspective 1:

A social work response to global risk issues will always include components of community education.

Implications:

In compiling curricula and welfare programmes, educators of students as well as practitioners ought to give priority to local risk issues that correlate with global risk issues, especially with regard to prevention, seeing that the issues and concerns that affect one region of the world soon become the concerns of everyone, everywhere. Since components of community education are always present in community work, students and practitioners need specific knowledge, values and skills that are required for community education in a specific environment. Students must be prepared by means of exposure to environments with different and corresponding risk issues - not only locally, but also internationally – to be able to understand the value of utilising the community education model.

Perspective 2:

Throughout history, community education has been a general social responsibility, but present risk issues compel the social work profession to consciously accept co-responsibility for community education within the broader context of community development.

<u>Implications:</u>

If social work wishes to continue to exist as a profession that is a response to society, social workers and students will have to realise that they have a leadership role to play in the broader context of community development, seeing that the contribution of social work towards reclaiming civil society is at stake especially within the sphere of other professional groups in the field of social welfare. Contemporary risk issues in society, particularly as a result of globalisation, are presently so complex that civil society needs intervention by professional and specialised experts. It is, therefore, a great challenge for social work students and practitioners to be both leaders and educators in a complementary manner.

Perspective 3:

Based on the theoretical underpinning of community education models, fundamental variables can be identified to conceptualise an ideal type of community education that is applicable to various aspects of approaches to community education.

Implications:

Both educators of social work students and practitioners must understand the knowledge base of social work – not in isolation but in the social climate of the day and in the contemporary social welfare scene. In this scenario the knowledge base of social work can be contextualise as assessment, person in the situation, relationship, process and intervention. This knowledge base of social work must be integrated with and utilised in a manner that complements community education. The ideal type of community education is thus inherent to social work in the same sense as psycho-social therapy and other fundamental and traditional social work models.

Perspective 4:

The ideal type of community education is based on a mutual exchange of knowledge, skills and ideas with the community, which implies horizontal learning.

Implications:

Although a leadership role in community education ought to be played by social work students and practitioners, it does not mean that an "I know best" and "I will teach you" attitude is to be taken up. A blending of pedagogy and andragogy is to be desired. This approach will allow students and practitioners to pursue the principles of teaching strategies that are tuned in to the learning patterns of specific members of particular communities. Reciprocity is therefore, an enduring principle that must be maintained.

Perspective 5:

Community education is a function of social work on macro-level and an identifiable role of the social worker in partnership with the community.

Implications:

Facilitation skills are inextricably part of the professional competencies of students and practitioners in all functions that are filled on a macro-level in order to be capable of generating and maintaining partnership with the community. Community education in social work is impossible if there is no partnership with the community.

Perspective 6:

Community education is a precondition for action by the community and therefore it is inherent to all other social work activities.

Implications:

Students and practitioners must realise that education alone is not sufficient to address risk issues in communities. Actions in communities must include components of knowledge, as well as values and skills. The creative blending of knowledge, values and skills must be part of any community intervention.

Perspective 7:

Community education is not an isolated, single occurrence, and prevention, awareness and consciousness-raising are pursued as process goals.

Implications:

Both students and practitioners must understand that community education is essentially process-driven and is utilised complementary to and with other social work models. In order to appreciate this aspect of community education,

students and practitioners must possess specialised skills, especially those of consciousness-raising of the community.

Perspective 8:

Community education is mainly non-formal, lifelong, open-ended, never completed, from a people-centred perspective, and aimed at sustainable social development.

Implications:

Students must be capable of pursuing community education and social development from a people-centred perspective. This will contribute towards practitioners' ultimately regarding community education as indispensable to social development

Perspective 9:

An inextricable link exists between education, culture and the economy to contribute to emancipatory practice.

Implications:

A social development perspective should be part of social work students' curriculum on models, perspectives and approaches. It ought to lay the foundation for practitioners to understand the link between community education, culture and the economy, since it provides practitioners with a frame of reference for emancipatory citizenship education.

Perspective 10:

The social worker's response is situation-relevant and related to local culture and indigenous knowledge since all activities, ideas, processes and techniques of community education reflect the socially constructed reality of a given society.

Implications:

Multicultural competencies are inextricably part of the tools used by students and practitioners in community education, since the content, method and process of education are directed by the relevant community's culture as the means by which they receive, understand and integrate experiences in their world. Students and practitioners must, therefore, have a culture-friendly attitude in order to facilitate indigenous knowledge and to synthesise it into a meaningful whole. Cultural friendliness is a disposition that is lived: it must become part of students' and practitioners' identity.

Perspective 11:

By means of a strengths perspective the knowledge that already exists in a community is extended to become assets that fortify the human, social and identity capital of communities.

Implications:

The language of a strengths perspective must be instilled in social work students so that the focus on assets and human, social and identity capital of communities would be a perspective that a practitioner absorbs automatically in practice, especially with regard to community education where the imbalance between the practitioner and the community with regard to power, knowledge and skills is obvious.

Perspective 12:

Concepts such as participation and empowerment mean sharing, working together and mutual learning in the community education context.

Implications:

The process of participation and empowerment starts with the educators of social work students, who act as role models for students in shaping their perception of education. By means of this process, emancipatory citizenship

education in the social work university classroom (Sewpaul, 2004) will ultimately lead to emancipatory citizenship education by practitioners in the community.

CONCLUSION

From the theoretical overview in this paper and the ensuing perspectives that have been constructed, a significant implication seems to be that social workers have a leadership role to play in addressing global risk issues. In view of rapidly changing global societal tendencies, practitioners in the social work profession ought to respond proactively by strengthening their traditional leadership position in the field of social welfare. Community education as a model of community work has been presented in this paper as an example of strengthening the professional leadership role of social workers. Leadership in community education, with emancipatory citizenship education as goal, should be modelled primarily by social work educators, so that students will be enabled to facilitate it once they are practitioners in the community.

With this paper the first step has been taken into unexplored territory. Vast possibilities exist for empirical research that will add value to the function, place and role of social work in the global social welfare quest for sustainable development – a challenge for every social work educator, student and practitioner.

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