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**Introduction**

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## NEO-LIBERAL AGENDA AND NEW MANAGERIALISM'S IMPACT ON SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

### *Introduction*

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*SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION* has witnessed many changes over the years, be it through the emergence of new theoretical frameworks, innovative practice ideas, or as a result of our times impacted by economic, theoretical, social, political, or ideological shifts. As members of the editorial board of the *Canadian Social Work Review*, we believe social work education is currently in a time of flex where we feel the weight of outside forces, be it from government, professional regulators, or university administrators. We, therefore, created a special forum and called for submissions, asking social work educators to respond.

*The Canadian Social Work Review / Revue canadienne de service social is preparing a forum discussion on social work education and research in today's academic environment. Over the last decade, post-secondary institutions have experienced significant challenges, such as decreasing government support, increasing government influences on curriculum and program design, increasing corporatization, and "new managerialism." How have these changes impacted social work education and research?*

Five social work educators from across the country have offered their reflections on this question, each representing a specific lens to social work education. The issues are as diverse as the authors' themselves, with representation from a faculty union perspective, an Aboriginal faculty lens, a faculty member who has been involved with the professional association of social work and the registrar's college, a director of a school

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of social work, and a Francophone faculty member from a school within the province of Québec. We offer their reflections as thought-provoking content that we believe will elicit a moment of pause – a time to think about the history of social work education, the current state of social work as a profession, future directions for the profession, and the teaching of its newest members.

The Forum consists of five reflections, Catrina Brown from Dalhousie University, Past-President of Dalhousie Faculty Association; Jackie Stokes, member of the board with BC College of Social Workers; Shelly Johnson an Aboriginal faculty member at the University of British Columbia; Nico Trocmé, Director McGill School of Social Work; and Ysabel Provencher, Francophone faculty member from Université Laval.

Catrina Brown writes from a faculty union perspective on constraints of neo-liberalism in social work education. She specifically outlines how universities are operating like big businesses, where scarce resources are spent on brick and mortar and increased administrative postings, while faculty members are pressured to do more and more with fewer and fewer resources. Specifically, she calls for faculty to know their collective agreement rights, to file grievances in an effort to uphold those rights, to lobby for tenure track positions, and to push faculty associations to conduct forensic analyses of university budgets. Brown provides an illuminating example of how the neo-liberal agenda has impacted (and continues to impact) Dalhousie University and the School of Social Work. She urges, “it is time to take stock of how to resist the neo-liberal agenda and prevailing austerity discourse rather than become complicit” (p. 118).

Competencies and regulation are the focus of Jackie Stokes’ reflection, where she hypothesizes that, “entry-level competencies in social work practice are a natural extension of existing educational practices” (p. 125). Stokes highlights the changes in British Columbia, specifically related to the British Columbia College of Social Workers (BCCSW) accepting the Canadian Council of Social Work Regulators (CCSWR) competency profile. One of the pressing changes is the implementation of an “entry to practice” examination. This has serious implications for social work academics and schools of social work; for example, do schools change their curriculum to teach to the exam, and, what happens to critical, social justice content? Similarities and differences in the accreditation processes in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom are explored, as are the distinctions between learning objectives, learning outcomes, and competencies. Ultimately, Stokes stresses the responsibility of schools of social work to prepare students to qualify as registered social workers, to be competent in their professional roles and responsibilities.

Shelly Johnson holds universities and schools of social work accountable to respond to the calls to action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, including Indigenizing higher education and making it accessible to Indigenous Peoples. Johnson urges universities to

acknowledge the territory upon which they are built and to consciously work toward reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. For example, the city of Vancouver is built upon never ceded land of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations. The University of British Columbia (UBC) sits on 100 acres of unceded land of the Musqueam First Nation. Imagine the UBC receiving a bill for 100 years of back rent plus interest. UBC has an opportunity to support Musqueam First Nations, for example by offering full-time tuition waivers, faculty-student mentoring throughout their programs, and employment opportunities to work on campus. Johnson says the time has come for Canadian universities to take action. Post-secondary institutions need to take a close look at “what they have, or have not, done to further Indigenizing and reconciliation efforts with Indigenous Peoples” (Johnson, 2016, p. 137).

Fifteen years since the completion of the Sector Study – a federally-funded study of the profession of social work profession in Canada (Stephenson, Rondeau, Michaud, & Fiddler, 2001), Nico Trocmé, the Director of McGill School of Social Work, poses the question, “is social work still in critical demand?” Using statistical data from the 1996, 2001, and 2006 Census and 2011 Household Survey, Trocmé highlights how the number of people who identify themselves as “social workers” has increased 25% over the past 15 years. However, he notes that the category of community and social service workers has increased at an accelerated pace. The difference in university education attainment may provide some perspective on this trend – in 2011 only 36% of community/social service workers had a Bachelor’s level university education degree, versus 82% of social workers. Further, within Québec, recent legislative changes have brought into question the role and function of social work. For example, child welfare assessments are limited to social workers and “psycho-educators.” The different roles and function of social workers across the country also raises concerns for schools of social work and their curriculum. A special working group of the Deans and Directors of Canadian Schools of Social Work has been created to examine the changes in the profession. Of particular concern is ensuring that the marginalized communities that social workers serve continue to have social work as an advocate and ally, where their voices can be brought forward and their needs acknowledged.

Ysabel Provencher identifies the pressures placed upon faculty in our neo-liberal university context, whereby professors have ongoing and continuously increasing pressures to do more and more, at the same time teaching increased numbers of students. Provencher specifically addresses the impact of computerization, putting forth the notion that professors have more demands placed upon them to communicate through computer-mediated communications (CMC) but the quality of the communication is gravely lacking. The pressure is to respond quicker and to increased numbers of students. Universities are supposed to be in the thinking business, where ideas are formulated and shared, and

through this process new knowledge emerges. Not having the time and space to think puts knowledge creation in jeopardy. Likewise, students are juggling multiple roles, working part-time or full-time, dealing with family pressures, and trying to manage their studies. Economic realities mean students do not get to simply “be students,” therefore, they do not have the time and space to process their new knowledge and fully integrate their learnings into their professional practice.

As is evident through the breadth and diversity of these contributions, the issues social work as a profession is facing are complex. We trust these reflections will give pause to that complexity and urge each of us, as social work educators, to pay attention to the pressures upon our professional identity and our work toward social justice.