Social Care Work: The Shaping of an Emerging Profession

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Abstract

This paper examines how the progression towards the professionalisation and regulation of the Social Care profession in Ireland is taking place in a global policy context. It suggests that the development and definition of social care work is influenced by wider policy factors established on a global stage but enacted at national and ultimately local level. The 'kind of' profession that is established may not only be shaped by evidence-informed practice, *Standards of Proficiency* (SCWRB, 2017) or a deepening understanding of the needs of vulnerable adult and child service-users, but also by a national interpretation of a neo-liberal global ideological climate (Apple, 2014). So, what are the implications for Social Care professionals? Just as global climate change can impact differently on local contexts, the global ideological climate can be experienced differently at local level. This analogy can be continued to characterize a paralysis or helplessness that can occur at local level in the face of a seemingly all-encompassing global force. The call to '*Think globally, Act locally*' (Borkova, 2012) in response to climate change and global governance, demands action, engagement and learning at all levels of society. Enactment Theory (Ball et al., 2011) is introduced here as providing a model (and challenge) for social care workers to proactively engage with policy as it impacts on their practice. The careful and necessary nurturing of an emerging Social Care profession demands the same commitment both at national (policymaking) level, but more crucially on the part of practitioners, managers and educators at a local level i.e. where the work occurs. This paper concludes with a model exercise that encourages practice conversation that includes policy as an intrinsic part of professional social care work.

Keywords: Social care, professionalisation, CORU.

Introduction (of a Newly Regulated Profession)

> *"We never know how high we are till we are called to rise. Then if we are true to form our statures touch the skies."* Emily Dickinson

A profession, any profession, is defined by more than a protected title. Banks (2003) asked what remains a pertinent question of the emerging Social Care Work profession, namely, what the development of external regulation and audit means for the autonomy, discretion, and creativity of [social care] practitioners? Share (2005) also points out that the definition of the field of social care remains open and its practice somewhat elusive and contested. In the broader European context, the development of professional care in residential and community settings is often referred to as social pedagogy or social education. Social Pedagogy did not 'begin' with the establishment of a regulatory framework or in the naming of domains of proficiency, it is rather according to Eichsteller and Holthoff, (2012) in McPheat and Vrouwenfelder, (2017), about being with others and forming relationships, not so much about what you do, but *how* you do it – a way of being.

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Social Care has, like Social Pedagogy, existed 'out there' for decades in Ireland. However, it is now one of eighteen regulated, or soon to be regulated professions, by CORU, Ireland's Health and Social Care regulator. This means there is now a greater demand for clarity about what social care is and where it fits within the wider context of care provision for vulnerable children and adults. It has followed the well-worn pathway of being broadly defined and then regulated through the creation of clear gatekeeping mechanisms for entering and remaining in the profession. Like the other regulated professions, the main entry is by gaining qualification through an approved course. The content of the approved course is based on the achievement of specified standards or professional proficiency. In the case of Social Care, there are 80 *Standards of Proficiency* set out under 5 domains. As CORU puts it, the *Standards of Proficiency* describe the knowledge and skills the social care graduate must possess (SCWRB, 2017).

The definition of what Social Care is has also become more focused, with CORU's definition emphasising the approach to rather than the context of the work:

> Social care work is a relationship-based approach to the purposeful planning and provision of care, protection, psychosocial support and advocacy in partnership with vulnerable individuals and groups who experience marginalisation, disadvantage or special needs. Principles of social justice and human rights are central to the practice of Social Care Workers. (CORU, 2020, n.p.)

It is the wide variety of contexts such as day-centres, residential facilities, group and individual, as well as the enduring nature of the professional relationship set in daily lived experiences, that sets the profession apart from other health and social care professions. So, while the CORU definition emphasises an 'approach', it is the context and nature of practice that provide the defining characteristics of the new profession.

Policy Meets Practice

There has been an understandable emphasis on presenting a clear definition of what the emerging profession of Social Care involves. Regulators, educators, and care providers try to bring clarity to what a social care worker is and does. However, it may be argued that the way in which public policy engages with care provision for vulnerable adults and children provides a context for how professional care is provided and evolves.

This contextualisation of care provision generally will be as significant a factor, in defining how Social Care emerges as a profession, as any a carefully constructed matrix of definitions, domains, and proficiencies. Put simply, the professionalisation of Social Care is occurring in the context of a wider public policy shift, the re-contextualisation of care provision in society. Daly and Lewis (2000, p.281) locate the profession (of care) in the wider socio-political context, at "the intersection of public and private (in the sense of both state/family and state/market provision); formal and informal; paid and unpaid…". Mulkeen (2016, p. 52). examines the policy contexts of marketisation and privatisation in social care and the implications for the quality of care and the conditions of employment of the social care workforce in the Irish context. She concludes that "to date no research has been undertaken in Ireland to measure the impact of marketisation on the quality of care for citizens using services, the working conditions of staff or costs to the state."

Marketisation (where care provisions for children, older people and people ill or with disabilities are treated as commodities purchased by consumers through markets) will

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undoubtedly impact on the nature of social care work and on an emerging understanding of the profession itself. The buying and selling of care provision move mainstream where governments follow a neo-liberal ideological approach where they "authorise, support or enforce the introduction of markets, the creation of relationships between buyers and sellers and the use of market mechanisms to allocate care" (Brennan et al, 2012, p.378). By locating the profession in this wider policy context, it is possible to explore questions about the influence of marketization (Ball 1994; Brennan et al., 2012 Dillon & Maguire, 2001) and a neo-liberalist policy hegemony (Angus, 2012; Gandin & Apple 2012) on the definition and understanding of what Social Care Work currently is and what it is expected to be in the future.

We now turn our attention to Enactment Theory, an approach that allows social care practitioners to engage proactively in defining their profession in a way that takes account of the wider policy context of their work.

Enactment Theory

Enactment Theory (Ball, 2012, Lopez, 2016) can best be described as an approach to policy analysis that views policy enactment as more that simply policy implementation or following instructions in practice. It sees policy enactment as a more complex process that involves people and place, so that the 'actors' (professionals responsible for carrying out actions based on policy) interpret and give meaning to policy, and this is carried out within the historical and practice context of the organisation and or community in which they work. This theoretical approach provides a frame to deepen our understanding of the impact of the policy context on the emergence of the profession of Social Care. It also provides a possible mechanism for social care workers to play an active role in shaping the new profession because it sees them as educated, skilled and competent professionals.

In making the distinction between professionalisation and professionalism, O'Connor (2006) points out that Social Care and Social Work are particularly vulnerable to external influences such as national policy or even dominant international ideological approaches, that both define and control them as professions. That vulnerability is caused by ambivalence towards the integration of theoretical perspectives as a support to professional insight. His argument suggests that although sociological and psychological theory is used to assess client behaviours and point towards therapeutic interventions, the social and political factors that contributed to the client's situation in the first place may then be discarded. He goes on to say that as a result, "any form of 'radical' advocacy attempting to influence a solution to particular structural problems may be jettisoned" (O' Connor, 2006, p.92). The role of the Social Care Worker is portrayed here as being located at the meeting point of policy and practice. O' Connor challenges the emerging profession and professionals in this field to become more than mere instruments of external policy forces and assume the mantle of policy shapers.

A similar theme is the subject of a qualitative study of secondary schools in England. The title of the research (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012) reflects its focus: 'How schools do policy - Policy Enactments in the Secondary School: Theory and Practice'. The authors view teachers (as well as other actors in schools) as 'interpreters and translators, as well as subjects, of policy and subject to related issues of power in this process, both those embedded in particular policies as well as in decision-making round the selection of and prioritising of policies' (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012, n.p.). Their approach is "not to 'blame the teacher for a failure of political insight" (ibid, p.146) or by implication, for any lack of action in challenging dominant policy dictates that influence how they do their job.

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The authors suggest that constant pressure to preform, in response to constant change, provides little opportunity to think differently or against (Ball et al 2012, p. 139). Another study (Lundqvist & Westerlund, 2019) focuses on school leadership and enactment of policy in the practice environment. They suggest that the enactment of policy in practice is necessary and agree with Ball and colleagues that policy analysis is incomplete if it does not take account of what happens to policy *in practice*. They place greater responsibility on school leadership, however, in the coordination of enactment practice and in gathering information on how this enactment by professionals impacts on professional activity.

The inability of an established profession such as teaching to challenge policy at a structural level because the professionals themselves are required to focus on measurement of short-term outputs, is itself caused by a policy approach. Such policy is therefore more likely to maintain an even stronger stranglehold on an emerging profession such as Social Care which has yet to 'find its professional voice'.

In their study of social care during austerity, Cantwell and Power (2016) provide a useful examination of how social care work becomes restrained, confined and controlled by policy decision-making that does not have workers' input. Braun et al. (2010, p. 547) refer to the same professional challenge as follows:

'Policy implementation (of neo-liberal policies) in the education field results in schools and teachers being 'expected to be familiar with, and able to implement, multiple (and sometimes contradictory) policies that are planned for them by others, while they are held accountable for this task'.

Evetts refers to two forms of professionalism: organized and occupational. The former is characterised by an increased standardisation of work practices and procedures with accompanying external managerialist controls (Evetts, 2005); the latter is based on autonomy and judgement of practitioners themselves using professional codes and ethical guidelines to inform practice (ibid). She later refines her definition (Evetts, 2018) as professionalisation "from above" (domination of forces external to the occupational group) and "from within" (i.e. successful manipulation of the market by the occupational group). The usefulness of Evetts' classification is that it acknowledges these contrasting aspects of professional reality as coexisting. The hope for Social Care is that it is not an 'either/or situation' where the profession is *either* imposed, defined and controlled from above *or* in control of its own professional and practice destiny; there is room for Social Care to develop its own professional identity.

Ball (2010) recognises the diminishing autonomy of professionals to the dominance of neo-liberal ideology on a global basis. This could be a tipping of the balance towards what Evetts called 'professionalisation from above'. However, Ball also offers the Theory of Enactment (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012) as a necessary and possible professional stance that can create a space in which policy may be challenged and professional autonomy bolstered. In an interview (Avelar, 2016, n.p.), Ball summarises his theory: "In the simplest sense, …policy always has to be reconstructed and recreated in relation to context…it also has to be translated from text to practice, from words on paper to actions."

Here Ball is introducing the idea that policy cannot be fully understood by reading the words alone. We must examine both its intention and how it impacts on the real world. This examination involves taking account of the role of the professional in interpreting what is meant by the policy and how it is put into practice. This, for Ball, means bringing both context and creativity into play as policy meets practice.

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There is a significant role played by the professional worker here. This is professionalism 'from within'.

To be fully professional, in Ball's view (Avelar 2016), the worker takes on an active, informed and accountable stance towards their professional practice. Their professional autonomy demands that they are engaged and creative.

"So, interpretation is: 'what does the policy mean?', 'what is it saying?', 'what are we supposed to do?'. And then translation, this involves the very multifarious processes that are put into place to relate expectations or imperatives to a set of practices." (ibid, n.p.).

Here Ball identifies two roles for the professional – they are required to examine and understand the intent of the policy in the context of their work and to be clear on what is required of the key stakeholders (the organisation, the workers, the service-users, the public etc). The professional worker is also an active player in organising and creating methods and practices that bring the policy to the 'real world' setting. This, he goes on to say means that worthwhile policy analysis starts with what actually happens in real settings with real people rather than with an assumption that policy is a linear act of implementation of its text. Ball (ibid) emphasises the responsibility of the professional to move beyond the 'letter of the policy' to make sure that the 'spirit of the policy' is identified and also reaches practice. This is an opportunity for professionals to be active participants in shaping future policy because they are engaged with understanding both the policy itself and its impact on practice and on the lives of the people with whom they work. This may further challenge the professional social care worker to understand their own place in the wider ideological context and to develop the skill to articulate, explain, defend their practice decisions and actions.

Will the Real Professional Please Stand Up?

Professional Social Care Work is now recognised, regulated, and (soon to be) registered in the Republic of Ireland. The long journey to the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005, which included social care workers as a profession to undergo statutory registration by CORU has had many twists and turns (Farrelly & O'Doherty, 2011; Joint Committee on Social Care Professionals, 2002; McSweeney et al., 2016; Power & Darcy, 2017; Williams & Lalor, 2001). This welcome development brings with it an enhanced status for an area of work that has existed alongside a wide range of professions – social work, education, healthcare etc. Its key characteristic is its 'professional closeness', sharing day to day events and experiences with people as they negotiate life's challenges. The core professional social care toolkit is based on relationship skills, and it is the quality of the relationship that determines the effectiveness of the professional practice. And it is the nature of that professional relationship – ongoing, engaged, involving ordinary tasks in ordinary places, that challenges a conventional sense of professional identity.

Certainly, state regulation and registration of social care professionals contributes to public and internal professional recognition and identity. However, the emerging profession must take ownership of its own professional identity. This involves developing a collective view in response to basic questions such as "Who am I [being]? What should I know [knowing/thinking]? What should I be able to do [doing]?" (Aymer, 2002, p.18). One could add another question here, namely 'How should I be doing?' (values/ethics).

This journey to professional identity has begun with registration of social care work. This paper identifies one aspect of the professional role, namely, engagement with policy and its real-world impacts. Engagement with policy, however, is not guaranteed to emerge as a core

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element of the professional role and identity of social care work. But without it, social care work may be limited in its effectiveness in responding to the needs of vulnerable adults and children because the unique perspective that comes with the nature of the professional relationship is often lost to policymakers and policy analysis. The experience of marginalised children, families and individuals would, therefore, remain at the margins. It is therefore important for the emerging profession to respond with a model for proactive engagement with policy, such as that proposed by Ball's Enactment Theory and to integrate it into a professional identity as part of a social care 'sense of professional self-worth' (Hoyle, 1975; Goltz & Smith, 2014).

The 'conclusion' to this paper therefore cannot be a definitive statement, but rather an invitation to social care professionals to adopt a proactive stance towards engaging and shaping policy that impacts on the lived experience of service users encountered in practice.

Fig 1.1 overleaf highlights a selection of social care proficiencies named by CORU (SCWRB 2017). It is clear from this small selection, under domain 5 'Professional skills and knowledge' that there is an expectation that the Social Care Worker engages in practice in a way that responds to the issues that are encountered in practice at a structural as well as at a practical level. Enactment Theory call on professionals to adopt an active, informed and accountable stance (active stance); the worker needs to move beyond the simple provision of a service (passive stance) and to consider the impact of policy on that provision of care.

The aim of this exercise is to identify and explore how the social care worker may respond to presenting issues in a way that takes account of wider policy and structural contexts as well as immediate practical responses.

Firstly, you are invited to identify an encounter in practice that has presented a challenge for the person/family/group with whom you are working.

Secondly, add to that description the policy and/or legislative initiatives that are aimed at guiding responses to these challenges.

Thirdly, explore the social care worker response by contrasting what a passive or active professional stance might look like, where the passive stance emphasises 'implementing' policy and the active stance emphasises 'enacting' policy.

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Table 1: Social Care Worker professional stance

CORU Proficiency	Practice encounter	SCW response
Understand and be able to apply principles of social justice in one's work including being able to challenge negative discrimination and unjust policies and practices; demonstrate an understanding of cultural competence; and work towards social inclusion		**Passive**
		Active
Understand and apply a human rights-based approach (HRBA) to one's work including the promotion of the service user's participation in their own care…		**Passive**
		Active
Demonstrate skills in evidence-informed practice, including an understanding of competing theories, concepts and frameworks underpinning social care work and demonstrate an ability to apply the appropriate method in professional practice.		**Passive**
		Active
Be able to analyse activity and adapt environments to enhance participation and engagement in meaningful life experiences and positively influence the health, well-being and function of individuals, families, groups and communities in their everyday activities, roles and lives		**Passive**
		Active
Be able to identify and understand the impact of social care history, organisational, community and societal structures, systems and culture on social care provision.		**Passive**
		Active
Recognise the role of advocacy in promoting the needs and interests of service users and understand the influence of system-level change to improve outcomes, access to care, and delivery of services, particularly for marginalised groups.		**Passive**
		Active

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About the Author

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