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Jill Gibbons, Mel Gray

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## PREPUBLICATION VERSION

# Teaching social work students about social policy

*Jill Gibbons and Mel Gray*

University of Newcastle, NSW, Australia

### Abstract

The paper describes an integrated approach to teaching social policy within a unique experience-based social work education program. It argues that the teaching of social policy should not be separate within the social work curriculum and provides an example of the integration of policy and practice in teaching students about child protection. It examines the teaching of policy practice using a strengths perspective where it is seen as a bottom-up, inductive process rather than an activity carried out by social work experts with or without the participation of their client groups.

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Students come into social work for a range of reasons, from wanting to become counselors, to wanting to change the world. In recent years, we have found students are increasingly motivated by a sense of social justice and less by the desire to be individual or family counselors. Unlike Rocha (2000) who states that ‘most students do not enter programs of social work interested in politics or policy’ (p. 53), we are finding that many of the students in our program, in a large regional university, are entering social work with a surprisingly good grasp of the profession’s commitment to social justice. This is a strength to be nurtured. Students with a motivation to work towards social justice are likely to be much more interested in the processes of policy.

Weiss (2003) conducted a study on social work students' willingness to engage in policy practice. She found that there was a relationship between the students' commitment to socially oriented goals, such as social justice and poverty eradication, and policy practice: the more they were concerned about poverty and social justice, the more they would engage in policy practice. She referred to policy practice as 'community organisation and planning', 'social policy formulation and activity' and 'administering social services' (p. 135). The challenge, as we see it, is to connect with students' commitment to social justice and to make the processes of policy practice achievable for them. At the same time, we want them to see the way in which our sense of social justice affects all aspects of our practice including our work at the individual, family and group levels.

There have been a number of papers on the importance of teaching policy practice and the use of experiential or service learning approaches to engage students' interest in this aspect of social work (Butler & Coleman, 1997, Iatridis, 1995, Johnson, 1994, Rocha & Johnson, 1997, Rocha, 2000, Wyers, 1991). Although these papers refer to the links between the policy activity of social workers and direct practice in community, group and individual work, there is a subtle focus on building the *social workers'* skills in policy practice rather than the application of their generic skills in engaging clients working towards changing policy. This positioning of the social worker as central to the policy process has a certain degree of arrogance that is not in keeping with social work values or principles. The 'meaning' of policy practice has seemed to be embedded in the *social worker's* activity rather than that of *service users*. This is challenged in papers by Vodde and Gallant (2002) and Wilson and Beresford (2000).

Within social work texts social work is separated into micro (casework, group work and some community work) and macro practice (policy, administration, social planning, and community education). The literature on teaching policy assumes a separate policy course

within a social work program (Pawar, 2004). Vodde and Gallant (2002) posit that within a post modern paradigm micro and macro are 'constructed binary oppositions' positing artificial boundaries and hierarchies' (p. 440). They argue 'that in order to adequately pursue social justice and deal with issues of power and oppression in a clinical context, the bifurcated structure of social work, commonly known as micro-macro or clinical and social action must somehow be unified' (p. 439). Mendes (2003) describes policy teaching as 'peripheral to most social work courses in Australia and elsewhere' (p. 220). A decade ago, Wyers (1991) advocated the integration of policy and direct practice in social work teaching.

Because policy-practice is based on the reciprocal relationship of policy and direct practice, real efforts to integrate content about each must be made ... The links are not easily discerned in all instances and much work is required here (p. 248).

Perhaps the difficulty of integration anticipated by Wyers (1991) is contained in the word *content*. Vodde and Gallant (2002), like the program cited in this paper, focus on the processes of policy, processes which are very much in common with the processes of social work as a whole.

Wilson and Beresford (2000) explore the absence of the client's voice in the development of the anti-oppressive practice model. They argue that the social worker's voice and activity have dominated this model of practice with clients participating only to support the 'experts'. This could also be seen to apply to models of policy practice expounded in the literature. What if we educated social workers to have the same respect, tentativeness and openness to learning in their forays into policy practice as they are expected to demonstrate in their other forms of practice? What if social workers assume that many clients have already been active in attempting to change policy, and therefore enter the policy arena as a learner, willing to participate in ways identified and defined by their clients? In integrating policy

learning with all of their practice learning, social work students would have a better chance of recognising the need to apply the same values, theories, principles and skills that they apply to all of their work.

White and Epston (1990), within a post modern paradigm, describe a process in which policy practice might occur, beginning with externalising narratives, going on to facilitating connections between people who have been subjugated in similar ways, and, in so doing, building community, and then understanding that this will lead to the community taking social and political action. Compare this to Rocha and Johnston's (1997) model which focuses on the social work students themselves developing such skills as advocacy, implementing a change campaign, techniques of persuasion and using the media.

Other papers have analysed the nature and amount of political activity in which social workers have engaged (Chui & Gray, 2004; Dietz Domanski, 1998; Gray, 1996; Gray, Collett van Rooyen, Gaha & Rennie, 2002; Wolk, Pray, Weismiller & Dempsey, 1996). They appear to link the political activity of social workers, including in their life outside of social work, to their policy practice effectiveness.

### **An integrated and experience-based approach to social work education**

Most social work education programs employ a didactic pedagogy. In this program we have developed an experience-based or experiential approach to social work education (Goldstein, 2000). Unlike 'most schools (that) require only one foundation and one advanced policy course' (Rocha & Johnson, p. 434), teaching policy is an integral part of all the learning units within the four year baccalaureate program. Within the experience-based approach students complete a series of learning units constructed around a particular area of social work practice, examining the values, theory, skills, policy, research, and practice pertaining to it, and using this knowledge to complete a number of practice-based tasks. This paper gives an

overview of the integrated way in which policy is taught in this program and provides an example of the way in which it works in teaching second year students about child protection. Although our program extends over four years, the approach to policy teaching could be applied to a two year/ four semester graduate program in social work.

Our expectations are that students will understand that social policies constitute one way of achieving greater social equality and that through participating in policy processes both they and their clients can contribute to a more just society. Policy is an area in which students can practise and extend their critical thinking, a core skill for social work practice which has been an emphasis of the this program (Gibbons & Gray, 2004). Policies can be barriers or can create opportunities for individuals, groups or communities to escape from the circumstances of their birth, offering a better quality of life or providing a way back in for people who have been marginalised and excluded because of illness, disability or harsh life experiences. Vodde and Gallant (2002) point out ‘intrapyschic and interpersonal problems are not self contained but are local manifestations of larger socio-political and cultural constraints or conflicts’ (p. 443). Policy practice can be a creative and collaborative exercise which seeks ways of connecting people whose access to resources and opportunities in society have been constrained. We want students to experience policy formulation as an inductive, negotiated or dialogical process in which the client’s voice is strongest. The involvement of clients or ‘opportunities for inclusion’ (Chapin, 1995, p. 509) in policy making processes is pivotal.

### **Theoretical underpinnings of approach to policy**

Generally, social policy in the USA, UK and Australia is taught in schools of social work, schools of public policy, departments of sociology, and departments of political science. In addition, a great deal of social policy work is done by independent think tanks both on the left and, particularly, the political right. There is a huge interdisciplinary literature. Consequently,

there is a huge diversity of subject matter and approaches used outside the social work context and it is beyond the scope of this paper to summarise this range. For example, the right-wing think tanks come to the field with a strong ideological perspective and they make no excuses about that. Some of them are traditionalist in orientation while others are more liberal. Some are centrist and less ideological. The public policy schools tend to be more 'scientific' and they make use of a good deal of mathematical and statistical material. Sociologists tend to make more use of theory (Jim Midgley, personal communication, 5 July 2004). For our purposes, social policy concerns the way in which services are structured and resources are distributed in society and social justice concerns the way in which those resources are allocated. Policy practice is about addressing the disadvantages that occur when resources are allocated unequally. Within social work, policy practice has increasingly become linked to structural interpretations. More often than not, policy is viewed as a response to social issues construed as pathological, or problematic social conditions in need of a solution or cure. Often the issues are seen as the enemy on which war must be declared, for example, the war on drugs and terrorism, and the effectiveness of policies is usually evaluated in terms of their propensity to alleviate such problems (Chapin, 1995).

Critical, feminist and radical theorists have been highly critical of individual deficits models in terms of which pathological conditions are ascribed to individuals. They referred to them as 'victim-blaming approaches' (Dominelli, 1988, 1989; Fook, 2002; Healy, 2000). The structural perspective holds that people are not always to blame for their problems. It sees social problems as socially constructed, as shaped by the way in which society is organised and social problems are defined. In terms of this view, problems are caused by structural barriers, such as the social class or cultural group one is born into, poor educational opportunities, lack of jobs and inadequate services and resources. From this perspective, policy practice involves the need to change social institutions that severely restrict people's

life choices and access to resources (Chapin, 1995). This view generated anti-oppressive practice models which drew attention to the way in which social structures and processes marginalised, excluded and oppressed vulnerable groups in society, such as the poor, the disabled and minority groups. Anti-oppressive practice drew attention to power issues, especially to the locus of power which resided in the hands of policy-makers and practitioners rather than clients. Yet anti-oppressive practice has failed to locate marginalised groups and individuals as central in challenging their subjugation (Wilson & Beresford, 2000). The social worker still has this role as White, Vodde and Gallant (2002) state, 'actions of this sort are not something that occur under the direction or influence of the practitioner but through the collective discovery of clients' (p. 444).

Chapin (1995) also attempted to address the quandary of policy researchers over the historical use of social problem definition to drive public funding initiatives, and the need to help shift the thinking of politicians, and other high level policy decision-makers, towards an examination of opportunities and resources residing within individuals, families and communities and barriers to the use of these resources. This 'social capital model' is somewhat different from the 'mutual obligation model of social welfare'. Chapin (1995) drew attention to the way in which some deficit approaches blamed the victim, and more recently have shifted to blaming the environment the person is in. Both analyses have problems, based on a particular social construction of reality.

Postmodern perspectives, such as social constructionism and strengths-based practice, have questioned the assumptions underlying anti-oppressive practice in social work. Categorising clients as 'oppressed' immediately engenders feelings of powerlessness. Both postmodern and strengths approaches question rigid mindsets, such as feminism and structuralism, that lead social workers to approach the helping situation with preconceived ideas that influence the way they listen to and hear the client's story or define the policy



problem (Vodde & Gallant, 2002; Wilson & Beresford, 2000). A strengths approach challenges the conceptualisation of the client as powerless and the environment as lacking resources. It seeks to connect clients with significant others, with community networks and services, engage in advocacy and activism with clients leading the charge, work collaboratively with clients, and to connect with human rights and social justice issues. These are all compatible with social work's socially oriented goals and values. A strengths approach focuses on listening to clients' stories of strength, resilience and survival in the face of adversity and making these the 'linchpin for action' (Weick et al, in Chapin, 1995, p. 512). Social workers favour strategies that empower people and that harness support by bringing people with common interests together to enhance their capacity for collective action (White & Epston, 1990). Community organising, networking, social action and participatory action research are all strategies that focus on 'mobilizing resources that directly or indirectly improve the problem situation' (Saleebey, in Early & GlenMaye, 2000, p. 123).

However, as we know, social work models which draw heavily on client participation are difficult to implement as clients do not always speak with one voice. In communities different groups have different agendas and interests. Gray and Collett van Rooyen (2002) sound a note of caution regarding community politics and the strengths perspective noting that politics seldom feeds on strengths. Rather politics of almost all sorts tend to feed on deficits and the often unrealistic embellishment of needs. They state:

Thus extreme care in recognising political dynamics is required when introducing the strengths perspective. In a sense it is highly political in nature - strength is also power. These connotations can result in a complex play between the participants and the power holders who often prefer to hold power through expression and amplification of the 'needs' (or indeed deficits) of those whom they control. Talking strength means empowerment of the 'people' - and thus loss of draconian power for some. This may

result in possible discomfort among intervention partners, and even potential aggression from some quarters towards those engaged in the potential change (p. 199).

Politics is about power and power can be used for good or ill. As social workers we need to be aware that the strength of powerful groups whose interests do not coincide with ours or who do not share our values, can be destructive for the clients and communities with whom we work. Policy practice in organisations based on a structural approach can be confrontational and blaming. The bureaucratic arrangements for meeting needs are seen to invest power in the organisation and its workers who further oppress the client. This is a dilemma for social workers, most of whom are employed by these organisations. They may construct themselves as change agents within the organisation, ‘thorns’ or mediators between the organisation and its clients. A strengths approach using the positive strengths of clients and communities, might construct organisational policy as ‘the best solution that has been devised up to now’ and see it as a work in progress to which both clients and workers might contribute. Figure 1 provides an outline of the application of the strengths approach to policy practice.

### **Teaching policy through the social work curriculum**

Specific policy areas focused on through the curriculum at this university are shown in Figure 2. Although this is applied over a four year program it could also be adapted to a four semester two year or graduate program. The first stage begins with an introduction to the relationship between policy and social justice, that is, the way in which policy impacts on equality in relation to income, class, gender, race, and age. In small groups guided by a series of tasks that social workers might be expected to undertake in practice, students gain an understanding of a structural analysis of society, current welfare policy and social work’s commitment to social justice.

**Figure 1: Applying the strengths perspective to policy practice**

<b>Stage</b>	<b>Policy-making process</b>	<b>Strengths focus</b>
Stage One: Engagement (engage the community in the policy making process)	Connecting people with common issues. Gaining knowledge of the policy problem involves accessing and studying existing records and research. Identifying and talking to key people in the community whom the policy concerns, especially clients.	It is essential that the problem or issue be understood from the client's perspective (client may be individual, group or community). Rather than blaming the organisation or policy makers, current policy is viewed as the best solution that the organisation has been able to come up with up till now.
Stage Two: Exploration (develop an understanding of the policy problem or issue)	The situation needs to be explored in depth and a thorough understanding of the context in which the problem or issue arises is needed. What can the social worker learn from clients and the community? What is the history of their struggle with this issue? What precipitated current concern with the issue? What previous attempts have been made to deal with it? How effective were prior policies?	The aim is to explore as many perspectives on the problem or issue as possible, particularly the client's perspective and to gain an unbiased understanding of the facts, especially of the effects of the situation or issue on the people affected.
Stage Three: Assessment (situation and policy analysis)	To gain the kind of in-depth understanding needed, a full assessment of the problem or issue is needed and a plan of action needs to be developed. Goals need to be formulated taking into account both the social worker's and the client's solutions (in policy work the client would usually be groups of various sizes) and the way in which these solutions are affected by agency policy. Assessment involves identifying and networking with groups who share the policy concern.	A strengths assessment involves reframing the 'problem' in language that is not 'problem saturated' focusing on what clients are doing right and establishing goals and objectives based on clients' visions and hopes. In community work it might involve compiling an assets register. The purpose is to acknowledge client strengths, resources, assets, and skills to empower them by connecting them with each others' stories to take action on their own behalf. At times the worker might advocate and lobby on behalf of clients but the emphasis will be on clients taking action into their own hands.
Stage Four: Intervention (leading to policy formulation)	Empowering strategies should be used and most often these involve maximum client participation in policy processes. Empowering strategies are those that build on client strengths and could include networking, capacity-building, participatory action research, social action, and direct involvement in policy processes where possible.	Collaborative strategies are best to access and mobilise resources and engage in policy-making processes (joining committees, lobbying politicians and government officials, submitting written responses, compiling factual reports etc as the activities of clients as well as social workers). Conflict tactics may be needed where authorities fail to respond to negotiation and bargaining.
Stage Five: Evaluation (occurs at each step as well as overall)	Determine the extent to which the goals of each stage have been achieved: Are clients involved? Do you have reliable information about the problem? Do you know who is affected by it? Are these people involved? Determine the effectiveness of the policy once it is formulated: Constantly monitor its implementation (hence the policy-making cycle because this involves returning to Stage One: Engaging with people affected, assessing its impact, identifying areas where change is needed, and so on.	Continuously evaluate the process from the client's perspective: Is the client happy with the outcome? Is the process helping the client? Can the client group act on its own behalf? Have they been empowered by the process? Have they built capacity and organised themselves sufficiently to continue the process? Will they respond better next time a policy problem or issue arises?

Adapted from Early and GlenMaye (2000)

In the second stage students examine the processes of policy: interpersonal skills, community work, legislation, research and politics. They contextualise this in the fields of substance use, child protection, mental health, and disability, concurrently studying theories, values, practice skills and research. Clients and their families from these groups come to the classroom as teachers (Gibbons & Gray, 2002; Gray & Gibbons, 2002). There is a focus on working with groups and communities to engage them in strategies for social change and policy processes. In a workshop on 'finding their voice' students reflect on how different voices may be advantaged or silenced within their classroom and within the community. On their first field placement, students are asked to conduct an analysis of the policy of their placement agency and how it shapes, facilitates and restrains social work practice in that agency. They are required to use a range of agency policy documents as evidence and to include an historical account of the development of policy over time and within changing historical contexts.

In the third stage, students examine more deeply the range of interventions used selectively by social workers, looking at the interaction between casework, group work, community development, research and policy in attempting to address violence in society. We use current events to make this relevant, one example being a case study of the reconstruction in East Timor in the aftermath of violence. In their second field placement they are asked to reflect on how their agency's policies and practices are the 'best solution they have found at this time', how clients have input on agency policy and how policies are changed in that agency. They go on to examine the diverse areas of policy impacting on families, engaging in multidisciplinary learning in this area with early childhood education students. At this stage students also undertake a subject with the Law faculty which examines the legal process.

Finally in the fourth stage, students are required to locate policy within an international and global context with particular reference to social work values and ethics. In

preparing for work, students, who have by this time experienced and analysed the organisational policies of three field placement agencies, critically explore the impact of organisational policy on themselves and their clients and look at ways of surviving as ethical social workers in an organisational environment.

**Figure 2: Teaching policy through the Social Work curriculum**

Year	Content	Strengths focus
Year or Semester One	<p>Introduction to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The values and social mission of social work, especially its concern with social justice and equality.</li> <li>▪ The relationship between policy and social justice and the way in which policy impacts on equality.</li> <li>▪ The distribution of wealth: A structural analysis of society</li> <li>▪ Introduction to current welfare policies on income support, race, families, youth, and the aged</li> <li>▪ Affirmative action policies relating to gender and sexual orientation</li> </ul>	<p>The purpose is to teach students the notion of dominant discourses that often do not favour our clients who are usually from marginalised or excluded groups. They need to understand that people are not to blame for their problems and that more often than not they exhibit a great deal of strength and resilience in overcoming adversity. It is important that they do not focus exclusively on problems and deficits but that they look for evidence of strength and resilience.</p>
Year or Semester Two	<p>The impact of ideologies on policy, for example, on policy relating to substance use. Politics, power and policy. Interpersonal skills and their impact on policy practice. Legislation and social work practice <i>vis a vis</i> policy change, for example, on substance use, child protection, mental health, and disability. Community work and its connections to micro and macro social work practice. The strengths perspective: Participation and empowerment in policy practice. The inter-relationship between policy, social change and research. The role of organisational policy in shaping and being shaped by social work.</p>	<p>It is important that students understand the dynamics of power and ways in which people can be empowered at both micro and macro levels. Participation is an important key as is networking to bring groups of similar interest together to unite in their efforts to achieve change or to challenge unjust policies and/or practices. Individual initiatives which challenge power are also seen to be possible. Clients and their families are brought into the classroom as teachers.</p>
Year or Semester Three	<p>Role of community development in policy development and change. Policy and violence. The diversity of family policy – engaging the perspectives of other professionals. The legal process (taught by the law faculty). Analysis of agency policy and its impact on clients and social workers.</p>	<p>An understanding of the relationship between a broad issue, namely violence, and its effects at a community and family level is explored particularly noting the use of strengths in the environment which can be harnessed to create new responses to old issues.</p>
Year or Semester Four	<p>Locating local policy in an international and global context. Ethics and policy Using evaluation in organisational practice to shape policy. Employment policies and their impact on social workers in organisations.</p>	<p>It is important that students come to understand levels of practice and how people might influence policy at the different levels – global, professional, organisational, and state. They also need to develop an awareness of how policy affects them as employees of organisations and as workers for the state in particular political contexts, and how they might build their own strengths to survive this.</p>

## **Policy and practice in child protection**

Learning in this model is designed to be cumulative, extending and deepening students' knowledge and understanding of practice areas, and progressively demanding more knowledge and skills of them in designing their responses to the set social work tasks. In the second year of the program, a six week learning unit on child protection follows a unit on addictions, which required students to examine substance use or gambling from a community work and strengths perspective. Students learn in small groups, working towards running a simulated community meeting in which they are required to demonstrate skills in and understandings of different models of community work practice, such as social action, community capacity building, community education, locality development, and social planning. Policies on substance use were examined in the light of community values, the political process and the engagement of various communities (including the substance using community) in challenging current policies and participating in policy change.

Students carried this first experience of community work and their understanding of the way that ideologies and social values construct policies as in drugs and gambling legislation, forward into the child protection learning unit. This began with guided exercises as individuals and in small groups, on the students' own experiences of childhood, building a collage of the qualities they have identified as leading to positive child development as well as noting the resilience of children and families. They went on to an exercise which asked them to use observations of children at play to begin to identify child development stages (see Figure 3). This task enabled students to gain an understanding of healthy child development so as to establish a link between children and their environment and the family and community as a context for intervention.

### **Figure 3: Child Development Task**

#### ***Be young and free again***

##### **Session 1**

Working individually or in pairs, go to a site that offers the opportunity to observe children at play. Observe and take notes of your observations noting the age of the children, the kinds of activities in which they engage, the toys or equipment they enjoy, their social interaction, and the like.

##### **Session 2**

Working in your small groups, share with one another your observations, noting the similarities and differences. Try to construct an understanding of age-specific development milestones of the children you have observed in relation to intellectual and language development, psychosocial, sexual and moral development, and personality development. Thereafter construct and script a five-minute play based on a particular or simulated situation flowing from your collective observation. Be creative. You might want to include books, videos, toys, or other equipment in your presentation. Your group will then perform your 'play' for the class.

##### **Session 3**

Groups will perform their plays and talk about the experience (ten minutes per group). We will then spend time discussing the exercise and sharing the visual material you have brought to the classroom.

Chapin (1995) said 'families typically escape poverty by accumulating assets, probably in the form of education or acquisition of job skills' (p. 511). She emphasised that when individuals within a community were in control, they could make do with the resources at their disposal to achieve an aim. They were more likely to acquire assets and seek solutions if they were involved as stakeholders in a policy situation. In this vein, the learning unit invited students to reflect on ways in which communities could be involved in strengthening families (see Figure 4). They were asked to critically analyse how state legislation, institutional structures

and organisational policies have been part of the problem or part of the solution in supporting families and communities in child rearing. Chapin (1995) stressed the importance of policy makers hearing people's own stories. Students were asked to examine their role in giving clients a voice.

Students in the program work in small groups of about 12 to complete a task that is grounded in current social work practice. In this instance, the group task required them to demonstrate a greater understanding of community work, using the feedback from the previous learning unit. This time they really had to show that they knew what skills were required to engage individuals, groups and communities in setting visions, goals and progress indicators, and to facilitate community participation and the regeneration of democratic decision-making.

The example used the introduction of a strategy by the Department responsible for family services in the state in which the university is located. This new policy aims to increase the involvement of communities in providing support to families and children and could be seen as strengths-based. Each of the groups was asked to target a particular community group to involve them in supporting families and children, focusing specifically on the skills of engaging and working with the community. The particular groups to be targeted were final year high school students, people in early retirement (50-65 year age group), older people (70-80 year age group), single young adults without children, and people from a community of non-English speaking background.

From their observation of and participation in the student presentation of the task, teachers were quickly aware of what the students had learnt and the gaps in their learning. In their completion of this task students demonstrated they had finally understood the process of getting a community involved. They ran engaging icebreakers. They gave clear and concise information about the new policy appropriate to their audience and using audiovisual aids.



#### **Figure 4: Small Group Learning Task**

You are an interagency group of social workers preparing a community activity for Child Protection Week. In your role as community workers, a particular group has indicated a possible interest in doing more to support children and isolated families in your community. You have decided to work with this interest by having a member of the group convene a meeting of their peers, to look at ways they might be able to support children and families in their area.

As community workers, the focus of your role at this meeting will be facilitation of the process – the participants will bring the content. Your small group will work with one of the following community groups:

- Students from years 11 and 12 (senior high school students)
- People who have retired from the workforce
- Elderly people (75+)
- Single people without children in their twenties and thirties
- A group of people from a non-English speaking background (NESB)

You will have 35 minutes to work with the group to facilitate their ideas about providing support to children and families.

The task requires you to:

- Put the other class members ‘in role’
- Engage the participation of those who attend the meeting
- Facilitate the work of the group and the material they bring to the meeting
- Present, if required, very brief and concise information about the role of the community in caring for children and the group appropriately
- Be respectful to your participants and sensitive to the dangers of patronising certain groups
- Demonstrate a strengths perspective and keep participants focused on a strengths perspective
- Demonstrate, if necessary, a critical awareness of different ideologies of families in our society
- Demonstrate that you have referred to and understood literature on group dynamics and group facilitation.

They worked with the participants facilitating small groups to give a voice to their target group. The dynamics of the role-plays gave excellent opportunities for further learning from the experience, for the role players and the presenters, as feedback to the students showed.

It was very interesting to be part of getting caught up in a powerlessness dynamic in the senior high school student group and to consider how this came about and how it might have been brought back to a strengths/ empowerment perspective. It is easy for this to happen in all sorts of social work interventions as we are usually dealing with groups who have learned to see themselves as powerless in making change. It is important for us to recognise that our own personal feelings of powerlessness are always at risk of being tapped into and to be able to use strategies to refocus on strengths when this happens (Feedback given to students on their group task).

Students were less skilled in drawing together the ideas that emerged from their simulated meetings and in ending the meeting. This was discussed and ideas for improving this in each of the presentations were shared and recorded.

It is quite hard at such a meeting to draw all the material together into something meaningful to go on with and without altering its meaning. However, it might be easier to do when you are in a real situation, with a background in this community and field of practice, clear about your agency's goals and your reasons for being involved in such an exercise. In the real situation it is still a challenge to stay with your group and not add too much of your own agenda to what they have come up with! (Feedback given to students on their group task)

In each learning unit, students also complete an individual task, again grounded in social work practice. Both tasks must be completed but only the individual task is graded. The

group task is designed so that the learning required for its completion is also relevant to the individual task. Figure 5 shows the task which was set in this learning unit.

### **Figure 5: Individual Learning Task - Agency Newsletter**

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I. Your agency has asked you to prepare an article for their client group newsletter. The newsletter may be any of the following:

- Foster parents news
- Newsletter for children in out of home care
- Indigenous families newsletter
- Newsletter of an ethnic community of your choice

The article aims to explain to readers how the new Families policy in this state intends to change the focus of services for children and families. Your article will need to explain clearly and concisely to your target group the criticisms of the existing system that provide a rationale for the policy, a concise overview of the new policy and a thorough critical analysis of the proposal, with reference to the literature on family welfare and child protection policy. In this task we will be looking for:

- Clear and concise writing demonstrating knowledge of the policy and targeted for your audience (no jargon please!)
- An understanding of child protection and family support in a larger social context
- Skills in critical analysis in examining the arguments for the new policy and its potential flaws
- An understanding of how ideologies re families or motherhood may be reflected in or challenged by child protection or family support policies
- A critical understanding of how the policy may be in, or against, the interests of different groups in society
- Creativity in the newsletter presentation to engage the interest of readers
- Clear written expression with accurate grammar and spelling.

II. Prepare a supporting paper for the above exercise that advises your agency how theories and research findings from the literature have informed your understanding, contextualisation and critique of the policy.

In this task we will be looking for:

- Evidence of your reading and critical understanding of relevant literature with accurate referencing
  - A critical understanding of child development theories, attachment theory, a strengths perspective and ecological systems theory
  - Clear written expression with accurate grammar and spelling
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One way of assessing students' understanding of policy is by their capacity to explain it to 'the person in the street' and this is what the newsletter invites them to do. Furthermore, in all of their social work practice students need to communicate clearly in writing and in speech. In this task students again demonstrated their creative skills in the construction and layout of the newsletter. However, they found it difficult to (1) explain the policy without using jargon, (2) to distinguish this policy from the state's new child protection legislation they had also learnt about but which was not connected to this policy, and (3) to see the connections between the policy and the interests of the specific group they were addressing. At this stage of the program, students were still finding it difficult to apply theory to practice, in this case to policy, despite the emphasis on this in classroom discussions.

With the emphasis of this policy on the research of Perry, it was interesting that many students did not refer to or appear to have read this research or apply a critique to it. Applying the theories to practice (in this case to the policy and to your target group) and more in-depth critiques were needed in many of the papers (Feedback given to students on their individual task).

In an experiential learning model critical reflection as well as feedback to students is an integral part of the learning process. After the group presentations students have the opportunity to reflect on their own performance and to feed back their learning to the larger group. Students' approach to and completion of the tasks gives the teachers important feedback about what they have grasped and what they have missed. This can then be worked with in class discussion and subsequent learning units. In addition, students develop their critical reflective skills in giving constructive feedback to one another. Developing a safe environment in which this critique can happen is the challenge for the teacher.

## **Evaluation of policy teaching**

Staff and students engage in an ongoing process of feedback, reflection and evaluation in this program made up of classroom discussion about learning at the end of each unit, anonymous student evaluation questionnaires at the end of each semester and staff team planning and reflection days at the end of each semester. Policy learning is one of the areas that are reviewed as part of the whole learning experience.

In a follow-up study of graduates educated in this model, it was found that this mode of teaching was extremely effective in equipping students with critical thinking skills vital for policy analysis. Further, it was found that the social justice framework informing the model was effective in heightening awareness of policy issues and in increasing competency in being able to intervene in problems at a policy level (Flynn, 1997; Gray & Gibbons, 2002). A study of student motivation and goal orientation in this program, which has used a combined quantitative and qualitative methodology, has had positive results, students commenting that they experience the learning tasks as authentic challenges, reflecting real practice demands (Gray & Gibbons, 2002). We cannot yet argue conclusively that our approach to teaching policy is any more or less effective than in didactic pedagogical approaches, however evaluations of experience-based learning models consistently show that they are more enjoyable for the teacher and the student.

Thus far our evaluation of student learning has revealed that our students have a strong commitment to, and understanding of, social justice. Our students are aware of the political context in which they will work and have a strong sense that it is the government's responsibility to provide adequate welfare resources for those who need them. Our students have a sound knowledge of social work's social goals and an understanding of the way in which they guide all levels of practice. Interestingly, most students indicated that they did not

want to work exclusively with individuals doing counselling or therapeutic work and wanted to engage in policy practice.

## **Conclusion**

In papers in this journal, both Mendes (2003) and Pawar (2004) have advocated for the integration of social policy teaching with social work theory and practice subjects. This paper has described the teaching of social policy within an integrated 'experience-based' social work education program. It argued that using a strengths perspective and integrating direct practice skills with policy can engage students effectively in learning about policy and policy practice. It has contextualised the approach to learning policy by providing an example of the integration of policy and practice in teaching students about child protection.

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