

Episode 127 - Dr. Michael Reisch: The State of Social Work Education (part 2 of 2)

[00:00:08] Welcome to in social work. The podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at W.W. dot. In social work. Dot org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of in social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice to research. We're so sure I'm Charles Syms your host for this episode. This is the second in a two part discussion with Dr. Michael Reisch on the state of U.S. social work education in Part 1 Dr. Reisch described the role social work education has in facilitating the emerging professionals understanding of the institutional and structural inequalities faced by marginalized and disenfranchised people. In addition he called for the social work profession to reconnect with its historical mission of social justice in this episode Dr. Reisch offers his insights on a range of specific topics which he believes Social Work Education must attend to for the continuing advancement of the profession. Some of the topics examined include the need to increase the rigor and diversity of master's programs Social Work doctoral preparation and the growing incorporation of technology in social work education. A Fulbright senior scholar Dr. Reisch is the Daniel Thursday distinguished professor of social justice at the University of Maryland. He has also held several faculty and administrative positions and has presented nationally and internationally as well as authored a number of books and articles on the history and philosophy of social work. Dr. Reisch continues his discussion with Dr. Hilary Weaver professor and associate dean for academic affairs at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work.

[00:02:17] Now as you speak about how we could have this shaping influence on our environment. One of the linchpins that you identified was really looking at who we graduate as you look at some of our internal challenges that we have in social work education. You speak about enhancing the rigor of MSW programs as a means to enhancing the overall quality of Ph.D. students and the social work professor. You also speak of traditional admissions criteria as a possible barrier to diversifying both students and faculty. Now as I think of those two very important things I wonder if in some ways they are at odds with each other or if perhaps there's a way that we can work toward both of those goals. And I wondered if you could speak to that a little bit more and I realize that's a complicated issue and it seems like I'm speaking if not out of both sides of my mouth at least in two different directions. One of the things that a lot of faculty talk about in the hallways but seldom will write about or speak about publicly is a concern that the expansion of Social Work Education which has been enormous in the last couple of decades in terms of the number of master's programs that are now over 200 that are accredited in the United States. Over 500 Baccalaureate programs that there's been a dilution in the quality of the student population. And I think from my experience we get students who are academically all over the place in terms of their preparation.

[00:03:53] We have some students who are as bright as any students in any discipline and as bright as they've ever been and then we have some students who at least in my judgment may not be totally ready for graduate school but we admit them because we need the tuition to help meet our budget requirements. I know that sounds harsh but I think that there's some truth to that. I think that if we establish quality as the goal of our education and made our admissions standards more rigorous and our academic standards and our schools more rigorous and sort of eliminated a lot of the grade inflation that goes on at both undergraduate and graduate levels that ultimately there might be a few painful bumps along the way but that ultimately we would attract a higher quality of student. Students would see that social work education is intellectually rigorous that it's exciting that it's socially responsible and that it leads to very interesting careers. And I know that this is probably controversial with a lot of stuff that we teach currently in master's programs anyway that I don't think we should teach at the master's level. That should be prerequisites for students getting

into the master's program so that we can really begin teaching people who come into our programs at a higher academic level and really at a graduate level I don't think that this dilution in the quality of professional education is going on in other disciplines. I mean I'm on a professional campus right now and I think if you look at the law school or the medical school or the nursing school or any other areas if anything they become more rigorous in their academic programs because they realize the demands are greater for their graduates. And it's ironic that social work is moving in the other direction in my opinion. And I think that's very unfortunate.

[00:05:48] We really need to make sure that our graduates are extremely well prepared in whatever field of practice whatever method they choose to practice in the future. I think we can do that. I think most of our students are capable of that but we have to set the bar at a higher level and we have to do what's necessary to help them get over the bar. I think that some of the things that we require students to take at least in the master's programs should be prerequisite for getting into the master's program so that our curriculum can then be more advanced when they come here. I think we should have greater expectations in terms of their analytic and critical thinking ability when they come into school. I think we should have greater expectations in terms of their writing ability and I think one of the ways to deal with this issue of whom we admit the schools I think we need to start recruiting people much further down in terms of their educational experience. We shouldn't wait to start recruiting people into their junior or senior year of college. I think we should start recruiting people at high school and getting them excited about working in the social work field. Studies have shown that the younger generation now is very very socially committed is concerned about all these issues and I think we should try to recruit them into social work so that they don't go into other fields and we lose some of the best and the brightest. I think this cuts across the board racially and ethnically and terms of gender. We need to do a much better job of recruiting students of color into our schools.

[00:07:21] We need to do a better job of recruiting men into our schools. And I think if we make the field more exciting intellectually as well in terms of its career opportunities then I think that we can do that. I don't think these things are inconsistent. They might seem to be but I don't think that they are. I think that we have to you know one of the ways and again it's ironic that I'm going to use some wisdom from the marketing field. One of the ways that you can increase market share is by enhancing the quality of your product. And I don't think that by diminishing the overall quality of our educational product we'll be able to attract that as doods. I think it's the reverse. If students come to schools of social work knowing that they're really going to come out with something of value added. After two years that they're much more likely to be attracted to social work the transition may take some years. But I think that that's a worthwhile goal and ultimately it will affect who goes on to get a Ph.D. in social work and become part of the leadership of the profession and the professoriate of the future. And the way that you explain that does make it sound like it's possible. But at the same time you point out that this really is not the direction that we're headed in right now. One of the challenges that you mention is the growing importance of quantitative research and external funding that has led doctoral programs to focus more on developing methodological expertise than focusing on theory policy and practice.

[00:08:54] So in fact we have narrowed what we are teaching and moved away from some very very important things. So what might the long term consequences of this trend be and do you see it likely that we could change this trajectory. Well the quick answer to your last question is yes I think it's possible that we can change it. I mean I think these are not things that are fixed in stone. I think that the social work profession has had a very interesting career in terms of how it's responded to external challenges going all the way back 100 years to its response to the Flexner Report when you know Abraham Flexner said that social work was not quite a profession and therefore we needed to make the profession more scientific and much more clear on our knowledge and skill base and so forth. Well you know in the late 80s and 1990s social work was concerned about the validity and

viability of Social Work Research. So what did we do. We created a national task force on that that NIH helped fund the Society for social work and research was created and various other organizations developed in that direction. This was a good trend. I mean I think we had to increase the quality of social work research. But like our response to many other trends we focus only on certain elements of the problem. Yes it was true that social work researches needed to learn more rigorous methodological skills. But that did not have to occur at the expense of also understanding the context in which those research skills were applied.

[00:10:40] I don't see a contradiction between teaching social work students greater methodological skills both quantitative and qualitative and also teaching them theory and teaching them policy analysis so they can understand the broader context in which research questions evolve and are answered. I think that schools especially at the doctoral level could teach both in other parts of the world. They do. I've been in other nations and I've met with young faculty or doctoral students. They are far better prepared in terms of understanding the theoretical and the philosophical aspects of social work and social welfare than many of our doctoral students. And I'm concerned about those because having served on many search committees interviewing young candidates they are very very bright. They are very skilled at doing the research that they've been trained to do but some of them have difficulty in extrapolating from those research in terms of the policy or theoretical implications. So I'm wondering who is going to teach policy and theory courses in the future. Who is going to teach practice courses in the future. If everybody is coming out of doctoral programs highly skilled researchers but skilled enough particularly narrow area of research there's a danger there will educate people who are 10 miles deep and 2 feet wide. And I think that would be very unfortunate. Well specialization has its virtues. If we become overly specialized in that area one of the strongest assets of the field of social work which is to see the interdisciplinary relationship of theory and to look at things and the broader societal and political economic context will be lost. I think that would be very unfortunate. I think that was one of the intellectual strengths of the profession. If you go back to its history.

[00:12:32] So I appreciate the balance in what you're saying that while you have a lot of critical reflection on the current state of our profession and the direction that we seem to be heading there's still quite an element of optimism that we could turn this in a more appropriate direction and have that broader base. So we are better prepared to educate the professionals of the future. Now back to the larger context. You do talk about fiscal cutbacks the growing debt burden many social work students are facing this in many ways makes it quite difficult and unsustainable for students especially given a desire to draw from a broad base of potential students and not just bring in students from affluent families. How do you see us being able to rise to the challenge of these fiscal cutbacks and address the growing debt burden so that we really can bring in all kinds of students to this profession. That's a very good question and a very difficult when I don't think there's a single answer to that. So I don't want to be glib about that. I think beginning at the local level I think each school has to look at how it spends its limited resources and see if it's doing so in the most efficient manner. There may be more efficient ways to teach its curriculum which could save some money in terms of faculty. Schools need to ask whether they have expanded beyond the capacity of their resources to deliver a quality program. So maybe some schools need to shrink in terms of size.

[00:14:24] I think that the profession needs to ask itself if this seemingly unlimited expansion in the number of social work programs is actually in the best interest not only as a profession of er of society or whether that expansion is not really improving the quality of either social work education or social work practice. I think the leadership of the profession both in the academy and in professional organizations needs to advocate more vigorously at the public policy level for there to be some kind of loan forgiveness or stipends or something to enable more students particularly students who are from economically challenged families to be able to go to social work school. It is right now economically irrational for a young person who is not from an affluent family or who

doesn't have an affluent high earning partner to go into social work school. Now I'm not saying it's irrational from the point of view of social conscience or anything like that or they won't get a good experience but purely from the point of view of economic rationality to graduate but the level of debt that many of our students are currently graduating with and to face a future in which social work salaries are from the point of view of real dollars actually lower than they were decades ago doesn't make sense economically. We've got to do something about that or in the long term we're not going to be able to attract the best students to our programs. So I think we need to do things at the local level. And I think we need to do things at the national level in terms of trying to get loan forgiveness.

[00:16:06] Both of my daughters went to law school and both of them went to schools in which there was a loan forgiveness program for graduates who went into public interest law rather than private firms. And as a result of that because that's where their interests were they were able to afford to go to school because their loans were paid back or substantially forgiven by working after they graduated in public interest chimes of jobs law schools can do that. I think social work schools need to think about the remote as well and it might need foundation assistance that might in this distance from government. But I think would be absolutely essential. Our students are making enormous sacrifices financial and otherwise to take on jobs that are not glamorous to work with populations that are often stigmatized to do the work that society knows is necessary but often would like to do on the cheap. And I think that we really need to give them every opportunity that they have so that they are not in such hopeless debt when they graduate that they can never dig themselves out. So I think that as you point out this is a very difficult and thorny question. We're not without role models. If we look around and see what has been done in other places in other disciplines perhaps that will give us a bit of a road map to how we address this issue. Now there's another big issue I'd like to put on the table for you to address and that's the issue of technology and social work education. We're seeing a very quick development of online programs a proliferation of online courses high Breg courses. Technology is just expanding very very quickly. And I sometimes wonder if we don't have the heart leading the horse here.

[00:18:05] I think we need to be attentive to issues of educational quality and sound methods of delivery but yet technology that's where the students are at. And in fact many of the students are more up on technology than some of the professors. But I wondered if you could speak to the role of technology in preparing tomorrow's social work professionals. Well I think that we still have a lot of gaps in our knowledge about the impact of technology on the quality of education. As you suggest Hilary we've been looking at this in our school over the last year and a half as well. And as chair of the master's program committee here during the last year I've been reading about what's been going on at other schools of social work and also in other disciplines and have remarked as you have that things are moving at such a very very rapid pace. It strikes me that there are some parallels there between social works embrace of quantitative methodology and evidence based practice. You know over the last 20 years and what's going on now in terms of technology in both cases we respond to a particular trend in a very narrow and sometimes impulsive way. And don't think through the long term consequences either in terms of its meaning for the quality of education and our intellectual development or for the field itself. Clearly technology can be a helpful tool in increasing access to education and the quality of education. But I think we need to do it in a very thoughtful manner.

[00:19:40] And I think what some schools are doing is kind of a bandwagon effect jumping on the bandwagon because they feel that this is a way of expanding their number of students. The scope of their programs the reach of their programs and they're doing it primarily for financial reasons. I'm very skeptical about whether a relationship based profession like social work can truly teach all of its content in an online fashion that is not to say that certain courses can't be taught effectively in hybrid or online fashion. For example perhaps a course on budgeting could be taught very

effectively in that way or course on research methods and so forth. And I think we're experimenting with that and I think other schools are as well and are using not necessarily in hybrid or online course fashion but just using technology more. I know that I'm somewhere in the middle between a Luddite and a geek. But I use technology much more in my classrooms now than I did before in terms of giving students access to videos and things like that and expecting them to use the Internet more in terms of their work. I think that very helpful. I think it is consistent with students aptitude but I think we have to do this in a much more thoughtful way and not just go whole hog in the direction of transforming all of our courses in this matter. We have to think well why are we doing this. And what impact does it have. So I guess the word is a bit skeptical. I would like to see if there is some evaluation about whether student outcomes are equivalent or significantly different in one way or another through the use of online or hybrid education.

[00:21:23] So I think we just need to take a much more judicious approach to this and use technology where technology can really boost the quality of education and boost access to education but not think that it's going to be the solution to all of the educational problems that our students experience. Now I've followed your work over the years and it's clear that you consistently remain firmly anchored in social justice as the guiding principle of our profession. Indeed as you look to the future you remind us that we must engage in the serious intellectual and political work of reinterpreting the ideals of social justice in the context of the major transformations underway and you speak to that in your forthcoming article. Many of your comments in that article look at a heavy focus on evidence based practice and indeed you've mentioned that a couple of times today you also speak to the emphasis on accreditation standards and the corporatization of universities. When I look at these comments together it seems to suggest that in some ways we as a profession have lost sight of this founding principle of social justice as something that should be integral to everything that we do and something that distinguishes us from many of the other professions. How might we be able to reclaim social justice as a central and guiding priority for our profession. Well first I think we need to be honest with ourselves more than ever the rhetoric of social justice is infused throughout the professional literature. It's become so much part of our professional vocabulary now in our code of ethics in our educational policy and accreditation standards in the titles of so many books that really if you look at Penny carefully don't address social justice very much at all.

[00:23:32] So we've embraced the concept at a rhetorical level but there's a real gap between that embrace and what's actually going on at the level of social work practice not universally but in many areas and in terms of our research. So the first thing I think we need to do just as I think would be kind of analogous to what one needs to do at the level of practice is to do an honest assessment of the relationship between our stated goals and what the reality of our practice and research and education actually is. And I think we would see that we are not always implementing our rhetoric into practice as we would like to think we are. And then I think we have to go through the difficult intellectual and perhaps emotional work of asking ourselves well how could we do this more effectively. What would a social justice focus in education look like. What would a social justice focus in practice look like. What would a social justice focus and research look like. And in each of our specific areas how do we translate this high flown idea into the reality of practice in both educational and practice settings. That's not going to be easy. I think that's going to be difficult. I think we're going to resist even the notion that there is this gap. But I think if we're truly self-effacing and honest then we have to recognize that that gap exists or students perceive it. I think the community perceives that perhaps in a more subtle indirect way we need to address it and then we need to struggle to find ways to implement them.

[00:25:15] That struggle is going to involve taking certain risks because I think this gap has emerged because we have acquiesced to a lot of the powerful structural and social forces that we've been discussing during this podcast and that in order to maintain our professional status we have to

come to a lot of these pressures which has meant that we've strayed from our mission of social justice and become more adaptive to whether it's the fiscal climate or the cultural climate that promotes market oriented solutions or to the changing character of universities and so forth. There's been some literature written about this that looks at the effects of this in the areas of welfare policy in the areas of managed care in the areas of child welfare in the school settings and so forth. I think we have to be very honest that what we're doing on the ground does not always reflect what we aspire to do and then we need to take corrective action accordingly. This is going to be difficult politically. It's going to be difficult intellectually and it may be difficult emotionally for us to confront this dislike be difficult to confront on a personal level. We're not all that we aspire to be as human beings. But I think we can do it. I think we have the capacity to do it where the only profession that articulates these values as among our ethical imperatives. So I think that we have a commitment to do it. I think what we need to do is to acknowledge that commitment again and to strive to put that commitment into practice that may seem very idealistic very pie in the sky but that's what has made this profession great when this profession was at its best.

[00:27:04] So once again in spite of our shortcomings you leave us with this note of optimism. This charge to move forward that we really can energise around these issues and do something. There's one other piece that I'd like to share with our listeners. As you wrap up your forthcoming article you remind us of something very important you remind us that we do not need to abandon the pursuit of methodological expertise in order to retain a focus on the big picture. But without recognizing the relationship between knowledge and values between methods and goals we are merely adapting to existing trends and abdicating our responsibility for shaping the future. The challenge for social work education in the years ahead is to balance philosophical consistency with professional viability and credibility. That to me was a very important statement and I think we would all do well to remember those words. Yes we do need to care about rigor in methodology and those things that at this moment in social work education tend to consume a lot of our time. But being attentive that does not mean that we can lose sight of the other pieces we cannot abdicate our responsibility for shaping the future. And to me that sums up the social work profession we have covered a lot of ground today. Much of the comments that I have drawn are based on your forthcoming article which will be coming out in social work education in September 2013. So I urge our listeners to go ahead and take a look at that. But I'm wondering if you have any concluding thoughts or comments that you would like to add.

[00:29:07] As you reflect on social work education and where we're headed. Thank you Hilary and thank you for this opportunity. I enjoyed it very much. I think in light of the last few remarks that you make if you asked people who have been in the field for a while or even people who are retired and if you ask students as to why they entered the field I would say almost all of them. They enter the field because of what the field stood for for its values. For the opportunity to help people and communities. Because it was a way of putting their beliefs into practice. I think that's very noble in the best sense of nobility. I think that's something that we could be proud of. And I think that that's not something we should be ashamed of in any way or shy away from you know whether people disparage us by calling us bleeding hearts or whatever other derogatory phrases get thrown around and if we look back upon the successes that social work has had in practice and research and policy over the last century and more almost all those successes have been the result of our ability to implement those values at the level of practice research policy advocacy for both individuals and communities. That's what is one of the critical things that makes our profession stand out. That's one of the things that we cherish. That's one of the things that when we speak of the history of the profession we celebrate. And I just think that in the future. Well I wouldn't say I'm optimistic. Let's put it this way. I believe that hope is an essential ingredient of the human condition.

[00:30:51] And I remain hopeful when I work with students when I work with young faculty when they go out in the community that this is still possible. The forces aligned against us are enormous

powerful pervasive but they have been in the past as well. And I think that if we work with our allies in many different disciplines in the community around the world that the values that we espouse can once again be put into practice from our educational institutions to the policy realm and everything in between. So I've been in this field a long time and I don't think I would stay in this field for as long as I have. If I didn't still believe in those values and still didn't believe that it was worthwhile the struggle to see them implemented. Well I really appreciate you taking the time to speak with me today. I think your perspective and your vantage point just has so much for us to all reflect on those of us in this profession particularly the new people coming into the profession. Can gain a lot from the insights and those of us that have been around for a while also need those reminders that you have given us today of what this profession stands for and what we could really have in front of us the great possibilities that we have. So thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us. Thank you again for the opportunity to participate in the podcast and to wish you and the podcast series at the University at Buffalo.

[00:32:36] All the best in the future and say hello to all the people who might be listening and that tell them that I'd be happy to engage in the dialogue with them through whatever medium they choose. You have been listening to the second part of Dr. Michael Reisch two part discussion on social work education. Thank you for listening. This is Charles Syms your host inviting you to again please join the University at Buffalo School of Social works podcast series in social work. Hi I'm Nancy Smith professor and dean of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history our programs and what we do we invite you to visit our Web site at [WWW social work that dot](http://WWW.socialworkthat.com).