ADVANCES IN SOCIAL WORK & WELFARE EDUCATION

Volume 14, No.1, December 2012

Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education

Volume 14, Number 1
Decemeber, 2012

Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education is published by the Australian Association of Social Work and Welfare Education, c/- School of Social Work and Human Services, The University of Queensland.

Design: Inkahoots

ISSN 1329-0584

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Aims and Scope
The journal aims to showcase material which is of particular relevance to social work, welfare and community development educators in Australia and New Zealand.Papers which present innovative or challenging approaches to current educational philosophy and methodology are particularly encouraged. The material should be original and professionally presented. A diversity of styles is welcomed, and reports on research from a variety of perspectives and research designs are particularly sought.

Editorial Correspondence: Associate Professor Liz Beddoe:
Dr Susan Gair: Susan.Gair@jcu.edu.au

Editorial

It is with some sadness and also a sense of achievement that I write this editorial, which will be my last in this role. As many readers are aware, in 2011 I was elected as National President of the Australian Association of Social Workers. I regret that the responsibilities of my roles as AASW National President and also as Professor of Social Work at the University of Queensland mean that I cannot continue as editor of Advances. Still, I can look back on the last three years as Editor with some sense of achievement.

First and foremost among the achievements during my term as editor has been the establishment of a co-editing partnership with Associate Professor Liz Beddoe from the University of Auckland. Thank-you Liz for being such a capable and patient co-editor particularly over the past 12 months as the demands on my time grew so dramatically. Second, I am proud that together with Liz and the AASWWE executive, we have established a trans-Tasman editorial Board, thus further extending the Australian and New Zealand educational partnership. Third, I am pleased with the developing quality of the journal. I am pleased that the journal is continuing to develop an outlet for Australian and New Zealand scholarship on social work education. The listing of the journal with the APAIS database has ensured greater accessibility of the journal to a large range of educators, scholars and students. I understand that the AASWWE Board is currently looking to improve the on-line accessibility of the journal.

I would also like to thank Dr Susan Gair from James Cook University for her willingness to assume the role of co-editor. Sue has published regularly in Advances and has a well-established reputation as a social work scholar. I am sure that with Sue and Liz, together with the Trans-Tasman editorial Board, the journal will continue to go from strength to strength. Of course, I will continue to undertake reviews as needed by the editorial team!

Turning then to this edition of Advances, I am delighted with the quality and diversity of papers we have received. The edition begins with Susan Gair's article on writing in social work practice. Drawing on a qualitative study of social workers' writing practice, this paper highlights the value of writing as a core, but often neglected, professional skill in social work practice. Elise Woodman's article explores social workers' perceptions of linking theory with practice. Her article, which also reports on a qualitative study, finds that social workers are actively engaged in linking theory and practice, and that supervising students and seeking opportunities for reflecting on practice helped in making these links. Beth Crisp and John Fox consider how Bourdieu's concept of habitus can help us to understand how social work students make sense of the transition to university in their first

year practice. Jenny Hay's article analyses the importance of the spirituality in social work practice and education. Jenny reports on her research with social work students, educators and practitioners to argue that there is a place for the acknowledgment and exploration of clients' spiritual beliefs as well as reflection on students' own spiritual beliefs in social work education today. In their article Vanette McLennan, Jennifer Boddy, Jennifer Cartmel, and Lesley Chenoweth, report on an educational innovation intended to develop students' knowledge of, and interest in, rural social work practice. Lynelle Watts and David Hodgson report on an evaluation of a teaching and learning innovation in skills teaching for direct social work practice. Robyn Mason and her colleagues report on a study of rural direct practice student placements. Caroline Linette provides a reflective article on her experience as a young mother completing PhD studies.

Finally, I would like to congratulate the AASWWE for its very successful social work symposium held at the University of South Australia in Adelaide in September 2012. We have already received a large number of papers for review and we look forward to publishing those in the next edition of Advances.

For now, I bid you farewell in my role as editor and I wish the new editorial team all the very best.

Kind regards
Karen Healy

Documenting practice so we're all on the same page: Upholding the creativity, power and meaningfulness of writing.

Susan Gair

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ABSTRACT

Every social worker engages in a huge range of formal writing tasks in their professional practice. Equally familiar is writing for advocacy or activism, and the cathartic and healing benefits of narrative and creative writing. Yet the identification of writing as a *core practice skill* is uncommon in helping skills texts. The aim of the small study described here was to document some of the ways in which social work and welfare practitioners use writing within the helping relationship. In-depth interviews were undertaken with a sample of 15 social work and welfare workers. The findings reveal extensive use of formal, practical and imaginative writing in the professional work of these practitioners, *from creative case notes to collaborative processes and cathartic creations.* Only a small minority of participants mentioned publishing this inspiring practice. The findings have direct relevance for social work and welfare education, and for transmitting practice wisdom to upcoming generations of practitioners.

Keywords: *writing; professional practice; communication skills; social work education.*

Acknowledgements: *I thank the practitioners who shared their 'writing in practice' for this project. This study was funded by an Australian Association of Social Work and Welfare Educators (AASWWE) Wendy Weeks Research Award small grant.*

INTRODUCTION

Writing provides possibilities for different, powerful collaboration between academics, researchers and practitioners, and a new partnership with clients (Maidment and Milner, 2007).

This is what the public needs, poems that can change lives (Cue, 2008, p.2).

The English word 'writing' derives from the old German word 'writan', (Luckhurst and Singleton (1996, p.1), meaning 'to scratch'. These authors ruminate that all writing starts from scratch, as an early task most children learn involving a process of harnessing our thoughts and imagination to claim and control our world (Luckhurst and Singleton 1996). Writing is a core competence of social work and welfare practice that can encompass a huge range of tasks (Healy and Mulholland, 2007; Thompson, 2002), from report writing, to writing as an act of advocacy, activism, resistance, or healing, particularly when working with disempowered groups (Heron and Murray, 2004; Jacobi, 2004; Older Women's Network, 2003; Pennebaker, 1997; Wade, 1997). Yet writing as a core, professional, communication skill is minimally dealt with in familiar helping skills texts (see for example Egan 2007; Geldard and Geldard, 2005; Nelson-Jones, 2003; O'Hara and Weber, 2006; Pelling, Bowers and Armstrong, 2006; Trevithick, 2005). Thompson (2002), who discusses various professional writing tasks, is one exception. Healy and Mulholland (2007, p.9, citing Prince 1996) wrote that:

Historically the social work profession has emphasized the importance of skills in spoken communication but has accorded little attention to effective written communication.

Creative writing as a tool for therapeutic engagement is even less evident in social work and welfare texts. In this article creative writing incorporates imaginative, resourceful writing where the author's voice is evident (Luckhurst and Singleton 1996).

WRITING AS A FOSTERED SKILL FOR PRACTICE

Academic writing skills are cultivated extensively in tertiary education. It is a required graduate attribute that students can transfer skills and knowledge from learning in their tertiary program, to professional and organizational practice. Everyday tasks such as writing reports, program proposals, funding submissions, and policy and procedural documents, to name but a few, rely on this transfer from classroom learning and assessment to formal practice writing. However, social workers can use writing far beyond the purposes of reports and files, making use of it in such circumstances as creative group work, community work, and case work, debriefing, bringing personal and professional issues to supervision, for on-line communications, and when giving critical feedback to clients and colleagues. Equally, reflective writing for practice is highly regarded in social work education and it is central

to much of the required assessment, particularly in field placement (Cleak and Wilson, 2004; Fook, 1999). What appears to be missing in social work texts and academic journals is an emphasis on naming, claiming and facilitating writing as a core practice skill. Some professional literature calls for greater facilitation of writing skills for practice-informed publications, yet research-based publications are still far more evident in social work literature (Healy and Mulholland 2007; Heron and Murray 2004)

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF WRITING IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Examples exist in social work literature of the therapeutic use of poetry, life narratives, theatre and art in healing social ills and rifts, although such examples are not abundant (Damianakis 2001; Furman and Collins 2005; Jacobi 2004; Mazza 1998). According to Damianakis (2001), historical tensions exist between modernity and post-modernity where questions have been asked about power versus knowledge, objectivity versus subjectivity, and the art (humanities) versus the (social) science of social work. Such questions may have challenged the identity and professionalism of social work, leading to a reduction in creative approaches as social workers navigated their way within a world of diagnoses, social control, bureaucracies, and the role of expert helpers in evidence-based practice (Damianakis 2001). While a social science perspective is useful (Healy 2005) a science/art binary opposition may be less helpful in fostering, documenting, and sharing creative approaches (Gannon 2005).

Therapeutic engagement with clients using creative writing processes, influenced by Indigenous and feminist writers, and narrative theory, has become more common (hooks 1993; Huggins 1998; Ouellette 2002; White and Epstein 1990; Wingard and Lester 2001). Writing is regarded as helpful in facilitating emotional, transformational, and spiritual healing, and fostering empathy in both clients and workers (Hojat 2007; Pennebaker 1997; Wright 2005). Most importantly, such engagement can encourage a shift away from the internalized damage of 'pathologised' malaise, and can enable clients to claim power and strengths as they write their own counter narratives towards self-healing (Damianakis 2001; Furman and Collins 2005; Gair 2007; Mazza 1998; Saleebey 2005; Stanley 2006; Wright 2005, p.118). White and Epstein (1990, p.7) argue that in a positivist science approach, an acute crisis is interpreted as breakdown and regression. Precise diagnosis and treatment is recommended to help return the patient to 'a good enough level of functioning'. In contrast, they say, a narrative approach creates space for new possibilities. The art and science of 'writing therapy' may be located at a merger point of those expressive and creative therapies such as dance, art, music, drama, photography, and play therapy, with other clinical, social, and community approaches such as family therapy, trauma counselling, community and social development, and related social, psychological and mental health interventions (Howie, Burch, Conrad and Shambaugh 2002, Wright and Chung 2001, p.279). While some narrative therapists have published about their use of writing in therapy (White and Epstein 1990; Wingard and Lester 2001), documentation of the wealth of similar creative work undertaken by many social work and welfare practitioners is not well documented in helping texts or social work journals. Equally, research documenting social work and welfare practitioners' use of writing appears limited.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative, phenomenological approach underpins this study. Rich data was collected from participants with assumed typical experience of the research topic and a capacity to engage and reflect (Creswell 2007; Strauss and Corbin 1990). The sample consisted of social work and welfare practitioners who were willing to share their use of writing within their practice. Individual, in-depth interviews were undertaken with fifteen practitioners, fourteen females and one male. Two participants were Indigenous practitioners. Pseudonyms are used to maintain confidentiality. All participants were practicing in northern Australia at the time of the study, with expertise across broad practice areas and geographical locations.

The concept for this study emerged in part from unrelated voluntary work I undertook in a small regional Queensland town in 2003. That work helped to upgrade my practice currency, particularly in working with Aboriginal people and organizations, which in turn, has informed my teaching. One serendipitous outcome was my involvement in planning and jointly facilitating writing workshops in that town in 2005, 2006 and 2007 for women interested in documenting their stories about family violence for the purposes of healing from such trauma (Adams 2006; Gair 2007). Most recently, I have explored how narratives can enhance empathy and enrich the teaching of communication skills for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (Gair 2009).

The research question guiding the study was: What are the ways that writing is used and can be used by service providers (and service users) in the therapeutic encounter? This primary question facilitated discussion within the interviews. The aims of the project were: to explore the use of writing within helping relationships; to contribute to increased recognition of the use of writing in helping; and to use the findings to inform social welfare education. No identifying information was requested. The data was analysed using thematic and narrative approaches, and theme saturation was reached through reading, and re-reading the transcripts (Strauss and Corbin 1990). In adhering to principles of ethical, qualitative research, larger quotations are used to preserve the context of the narratives. Additionally, in keeping with the topic, some segments of data are offered here as poetic representations (Liamputtong 2007; Richardson 2002). I acknowledge that, unless otherwise identified, all interpretations and constructions are my own.

FINDINGS

Almost all of the participants noted formal recording requirements, and the related constraints. While such writing was not the focus of this project, it seemed a useful place to start the interviews. One assumption held by this researcher, that clear boundaries might be drawn between required recording and more creative writing, was not well-supported in the data from this study. The key emerging themes were: Court reports and creative case notes; Collaborative processes, shared power and self-help; Correspondence to recap and re-story, and Cathartic creation and poems for improved practice. These themes are discussed in turn.

Court reports and creative case notes

Organisational-related writing undertaken by participants included charts, file notes, case notes, timelines, support letters, media releases, formal letters, and Minutes of meetings. Larger written documents mentioned were domestic violence orders, funding submissions, presentations, tendering documents, policy documents, newsletters, evaluations, reports for annual general meetings, and pre-sentence reports. More creative tasks included designing posters, pamphlets, and workshop programs. Comments encapsulating these tasks noted required procedural explicitness and constraints, differing norms across sectors, the time consuming nature of required writing, different styles of working, and some cautions. Creative input clearly is identified:

The court reports … never included the true individual, only the offending side, it never introduced the clash of cultures, why the offending was happening. We had a team leader… a structure… 'Are you presenting this report?' Because of the framework there was no Indigenous perspective…(but) they weren't offending youth, they were youth in need… So by putting that in the report it allowed the Magistrate to identify the clash in cultures…more sensitive towards our youth and our dads… painting the picture from two different angles…'How many of you think this kid needs a harsh lesson in life or a sensitive one'… it was like you say, social action in writing… (Tanya).

Most recently I worked in health… it was very much about recording things… very different to… my previous non-government organization- its purpose in the charts is very explicit… covering different criteria … not subjective… succinct, so others could see what's been done … and provide support to the same person… I did find a way to put more of myself into the writing - normally you would say 'the patient' …- I'd actually write their name…words are so important…and very mindful of who's going to be reading what you've written…Within women's services it was… providing encouragement and space for people to … tell their stories (Cassandra).

…with the bureaucratic environment of the public sector your writing becomes report writing… documents pumped out on a regular basis…writing about policy, writing about a complaint … the content takes different shapes… but there's a fairly structured way in which you write…In the counselling room … you've got the file … you write up the session after the person's gone … might scribble some bits down while they're there,… But a few years ago I worked at (agency) and there was new funding for gambling help …so this client, a young girl - I'd been reading a lot about narrative therapy - I asked her could we explore a different way. … Could she help me understand…what this problem looked like? … I asked could I write it down… we reversed the roles in a way... she's telling me …how gambling is like being in an elevator… (Sierra).

Loretta appears to imbue her required case notes with creativity:

I'd love to give you a copy, without names, of some of my case notes ... Because I get a lot of compliments about my case notes from other workers who say 'oh that was so good, it gave me a good feel, exactly what was going on'… I've always tried to be creative in my recording.

Similarly, Penny's required reports are permeated with additional voices:

... there's reports, Management Reports and AGM reports, well they can be fairly creative in their own way, trying to write with your own voice … especially again, in an organization like this, trying to write with that organizational voice, and that organizational culture, it's quite important, and not fall into a quasi-legal bureaucratic mode of writing.

Some comments above make comparisons between formal practice recording and more creative approaches. However, most participants appeared to ignore such demarcation, providing evidence of an educative, creative and even social action stance in their formal writing.

Collaborative processes, shared power and self-help

A majority of participants reported using writing within a collaborative, shared process with clients, 'so we're all on the same page' one participant (Sierra) quipped. They identified that writing helped clients to communicate their feelings, process muddled thoughts, and overcome barriers in the therapeutic engagement. Further, writing was used to foster a different perspective, to help clients rehearse or re-story an event, and for healing. Some participants noted that writing might not be useful for everyone, and that minimal literacy could restrict the use of writing in practice, or may cause shame. Again, cautions are noted about the power of the written word.

…when you're stuck with people and they're not sure what decision to make, … write down… some of the benefits and drawbacks…when you write on paper it is more powerful than if you talk about it. … A number of times I've written things down like a rehearsal. One of the most important parts of this was to empathise… be respectful, …Sometimes people also realize how bad it really is when it is written down… and then you read it out … It's traumatic actually. In the prison work… at the end of the sessions… I say… 'this is what I'm thinking of writing down, what do you think?' The word is very powerful so as social workers we have a lot of influence, ... sharing some of that power, as much as we can, is important (Imelda).

Loretta spoke of writing as a strategic tool to help clients process their feelings and thinking, and begin their own healing:

Writing is a way of processing… when we write we process things differently… I give them a folder… and an exercise book… I ask 'are you okay with reading?' Then I say 'I want you to read some of that... get a highlighter… and …write questions in your exercise book'… so we start engaging right there…the start of the process of writing. I've got some who don't bring it in…I say 'you don't have to share it with me but it will help me trying to understand'. Not just writing - writing can be a really hard process for some people - (so we) add… colours… photos… cartoons… I have a girl who…likes writing lyrics for songs…

Equally, Carla identified the value of song writing:

… you know the sort of music based around rap … just listening and hearing what they say… it's amazing, the messages…

While Loretta, above, encouraged writing for homework, Grant often recommended it only within sessions to safeguard some clients:

I use a lot of writing, notes, reports, diagrams, drawings, plans, play therapy …and kids might do homework, write down their 'lightening thoughts' and 'rainbow thoughts', that can be quite good… When it comes to someone with trauma… usually I get them to do it there, because part of their cycle is avoidance so they might not come back…and if they write something at home and their anxiety starts to go high and they start to get psychotic ... it's just not safe for them to do it at home by themselves … Writing is a tool of expression… for things that people can't say… but when you've written it, you're halfway there… an emotionally articulate social worker… can relate with some understanding and hopefully some empathy.

In this poetic representation, I sought to illuminate a powerful collaboration, and offer an alternative to lengthy blocks of data:

A young man, 24, in a
Horrible, horrible boarding house,
Disconnected from family, and
a pretty long-term drug problem,
So we met in the park.

I'd take a book, it had a carbon page,
I'd write down what we talked about,
You often forget things', I said.
We'd sign it, signing was important, and
he took his carbon page to read later.

It was as if the whole fear of
writing things down
had shifted and changed,
and he'd say'
write that down!'.
(Sierra)

In a group setting Elizabeth sought to facilitate writing for therapeutic enjoyment, with mixed response:

We decided to run a series of workshops… The first one was called 'Write your heart out'… we hoped they might be able to reflect on their day or where they're at… We did the 'Write your heart out' on my first tour of the Gulf. You'd write for…about 10 or 15 minutes, then read it through… highlight the ones that stand out the most…and write them out again …cut them out and decorate them. Some people really liked it, some… didn't really get anything out of it, fair enough I guess… I ran workshops with people who were long-term unemployed…most of them were Indigenous… just using photographs …I was surprised, people wrote quite a lot, actually, people liked to write.

For clients who may find writing a challenge, Joanne acts as scribe:

'I'll write down all those things that are worrying you'…I drew a cup…'What sort of things

drain your cup'…she started listing things… 'What sort of things fill up your cup?' … and she was smiling … a real engagement tool (Joanne).

Similarly, Tanya identifies her use of writing as a very meaningful tool with young people, and notes her own journey to writing:

With the seventh graders… I have that diary process …they write down how they are feeling, draw an emotion face and write down the words, … next time we talk about it and look at the last time…so it's an important tool in therapy… I don't keep notes about clients…I just do the exercise book diary, they don't even have to identify themselves in the book… part of it can be story writing, if they find it uncomfortable to talk … they're allowed to see themselves as another in the story… (A different) program I did (was) self mapping… the boys were really good at identifying the issues, by picture and writing…they either burnt it or kept it …I think it is about a release … The process came out of my own counselling… I was a DV victim and the social worker asked me to write my issues out …I think you write it down to the bottom - … 'that's what it was, I wasn't considered an important child'…or 'somebody told me I was useless'…- Writing is healing for me …I think it's because of what I learned in social work… I think once you've written about your struggle you're actually becoming more at peace with yourself.

Finally, Annie assertively recommends writing for sleeplessness:

… clients might be having difficulty sleeping, waking up and not being able to get back to sleep…stressed and anxious… rather than staring at the ceiling … get a pen and paper…

Wright (2005) claims writing is a creative answer to engaging in counselling across cultures. She outlines her successes in encouraging reading and writing by clients between appointments, although she cautions that low mood can be an outcome. Wright (2005) notes that writing can reveal the unspeakable for clients who have difficulty speaking their story. Mirroring Wright's findings, the participants above identify very similar successes, strategies, and cautions. Several non-Indigenous practitioners above noted the worth of writing to enhance and extend their work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups, while Indigenous practitioners equally embraced its usefulness in their practice. De Salvo (1999) argues that to aid healing, it is critical that writing combines descriptions of an event with feelings, from then and now, to unravel how the past impinges on the present. Wright (2009, p.628) noted that people might not be 'shamed' by the written word in the same way that they might be if they sat in a relationship with 'a therapist' and spoke them.

Correspondence to recap and re-story

A number of participants used letter writing in their work, citing Foucault, Michael White, and narrative or family therapy, as influential. Similarly, White and Epstein (1990) passionately promoted the use of letter writing by therapists and clients. Again, a poetic presentation is included:

The other way I have used writing, is writing letters to children I've worked with, and actually posted some of them between appointments…basically a summary of some of the good work that

we've done… saying 'thank you so much for visiting with us and that was very clever of you to…', put some stickers on it for some of the strengths they have, what they've shared and 'looking forward to seeing you and your mum and dad next time', that sort of thing… some of the letters were at the end of the session, when people had finished, summarizing, for them to have as a keepsake…When it was during the sessions, parents would say the children were excited to have… something they could read over and over… (Cassandra).

In a similar way, Loretta uses technology for written communication, writing emails after or even in place of sessions:

…then what I do is follow-up emails... going through some of the points… we've been talking about, … re-emphasising. I write to them and many of them write back…some of my people print them up and put them in their folder, which is our journey together. A lady… trying to deal with detoxing as well as her mental illness …I talked to her over the telephone but it wasn't overly useful …so I'd send her an email. Sometimes it will take an hour to write, I'd write stuff and go back and put headings in because she might only read a bit…it's a lovely way of working, very affirming…

In this poetic representation of some data, I sought to uphold the power of re-storying lives through letters:

A young man in a violent family,
Really challenging behaviours.
He was a little renegade.
Yet he'd come underneath all that.
After a play session…

I wrote him a little letter
That I gave him next time he came
Acknowledging his bravery
His willingness to take a risk being here, and then the trust…
You can see these capacities.

You imagine in fifty years time
He may not have had a good reputation
And he might have kept the letter
One of his grandkids might say
There's been a part I didn't know…
(Rose)

Wright (2002; 2005) revealed that she writes emails and gets replies between sessions. Further she notes that writing may be the medium of choice for some clients who valued the re-readability of such writing. Similarly, data under this theme illuminates how correspondence was a powerful means of communication and expression as practitioners worked to re-story vulnerable lives, and provide a positive, lasting legacy.

Cathartic creations and poems for improved practice

Charon (2001) believes that practitioners absorb and display the inevitable results of being submerged in pain, unfairness, and suffering. Participants in this study revealed that they used writing as a private, debriefing tool to emerge from stressful cases and busy lives, and for wellbeing and self-care. Further, they used writing to affirm beliefs and values, and ponder over past clients or programs for improved practice. Poetry played a role, as did journaling, art, letter writing, and scrawled 'streams of consciousness' (Pennebaker 2004, p.61):

…my work is such a huge part of my life that a lot of the journaling is about that… how much my values and beliefs and activism is tied up in my work,…it amazes me sometimes when I pick up and open a past page at random and look at the connection I've been making, or the analysis, or the frustration. It's not just personal, … emotional; … it's also a recording of life unfolding in some ways. I have periods when I scribble furiously every day… It started to lessen when I started …keep(ing) a painting journal… I did a big watercolour on paper…a world map…On each landmass I tried to write the kinds of violence against women … what's the word, cathartic… it was a… real visual expression of writing on art (Penny).

Loretta used poetry to debrief and to ponder with affection about some service users:

I write poetry, for example writing about what (the service) means to people, I've got a whole set of poetry, one of which is called 'Bowler Hat' … I had a particular person in mind… I don't call them clients, they're people… some of them see the poetry, some of them don't… a lot of poetry writing can go on.

Similarly, Cassandra, nominated poetry, journaling, and reflection for improved practice:

I have written some poems and I've found journal writing around interactions with families really useful…keeping names and anything identifying out of it but just a record. When I've worked really well and I want to document that and reflect a bit more about why that might have been… Or otherwise if something hadn't worked well, in a similar way, document it, then try to identify… some research… or literature, try to see what others might have done… and certainly when supervision is happening… then you've got some documentation that you can refresh your memory and then have a conversation.

Grant spoke of his poetry writing as a stress release and debrief from the shocking stories some clients tell:

I like to write poetry, if something's happened, … something's going around and around in my head, I find if I do that it's very helpful… Wrote a poem about Timor once, 'The Howling Dogs of Timor', it was after some soldiers told me some things that had happened over there, … to animals… The things you hear can challenge your own belief systems, … core assumptions, and can cause stress… I carry stress … so writing's great I think.

For Rose, this penned and dated affirmation was revisited regularly for ongoing wellbeing:

8th Nov 2007- I am only a visitor here-I will offer my skills and knowledges unreservedly, for as long as I can do it but I am not able to take any responsibility for anything beyond my own actions, behaviours and statements. This is a challenging environment…

Finally, Jen used fast writes for beneficial self-therapy:

… what I call 'fast writes'… the 'fast write' rules (are) you've got to keep the pen moving. There are two ways I use it. One is you set aside time to just do regular fast writes… it's like a subconscious thing happens, you sort out your own issues as you write. The other way is you can document the main issues and your own questions, or go through a case, preparing for your own supervision.

It is evident that poetry, and other creative writing was therapeutic for these practitioners. Lerner (1981, cited in Furman and Collins 2005, p.574) noted Aristotle's wise counsel that 'the writing of poetry helps revive the soul, relieving it of the effects of trauma in a process similar to what is now known as catharsis'.

DISCUSSION

These findings reveal that practitioners in this study made extensive use of formal, practical, innovative and therapeutic writing in their work, confirming for me that writing, including creative writing, is a core communication skill in use. While some participants distinguished required writing (reports, case files) from creative writing, the majority of participants did not draw this distinction. Rather, they appeared to deftly weave together writing styles as required. Of interest, one practitioner specifically speaks of turning to the literature 'to try to see what others might have done', reflecting Charon's (2001) words that reflective practitioners turn to the literature to grow their understanding of their own area of practice. Yet only two participants mentioned publishing as a type of practice writing, and only one confirmed they had published about their practice.

It is acknowledged here that 'publishing about practice' was not the focus of this study, and participants were recruited for their interest in creative, rather than academic writing. Therefore, highlighting a hiatus in practitioner publications could be perceived to be extrapolating beyond the findings. However, it is pertinent to suggest here that some social workers in practice, and many in the academy, including students, might be surprised at the creative, inspiring work documented here, because most of it is not published. Other authors have identified this clear deficit (Healy and Mulholland 2007; Heron and Murray 2004). Of interest, two practitioners deliberated over this absence, and while a lack of time was nominated as a significant constraint, still they pondered why more writing was not achieved.

While not wanting to diminish the 'insufficient time' factor, it may be that social work and welfare education has contributed to the deficit in practitioner publications. Healy, in Healy and Mulholland (2007, p.2) notes that attendees at her writing workshops identified 'not only had their professional education not prepared them for such daily writing tasks as reports and case-notes, but it also failed to prepare them for writing for publication'.

Further it might be speculated that students were minimally prepared for creative writing, given its absence in helping skills texts. Only two practitioners in this study mentioned being prepared through their university studies for the huge range of writing tasks they undertake. Admittedly, the findings offer testimony that if practitioners did not explicitly learn creative writing skills during their education, nevertheless they were able to develop innovative and creative practice, although they did not progress to publishing about it.

As Healy and Mulholland (2007) note, links may not be drawn explicitly for students between academic learning, assignment writing, journal writing, and transferring these skills to publish their practice. Students may need such encouragement through their tertiary education to embrace academic and creative writing, and to view this learning as preparation for writing within practice, and writing about practice once they graduate. Further, a clearer conceptualisation of, and advocating for, writing as a medium where experienced workers can transmit practice wisdom to the novice, and role-model reflective practice, appears to be required.

Worthy of note, some practitioners' demonstrated surprise at the extent of their own writing practice. Three participants similarly commented at the end of the interviews 'you probably got more out of me than I thought you were going to …I didn't think I had that much to say about writing'. One interpretation of these comments might be that innovative writing is a well-used practice skill that may be so familiar it has become an unconscious competence that, for the most part, is seen as part of the job. It does not become published work because is it not seen as publishable material, nor is writing for publication seen as a meaningful part of practice. On this point, one participant commented that as a profession, we needed to believe much more in the value of writing, and demonstrate that belief, to help students and graduates 'to see the value in writing more, writing differently'. She continued:

'…maybe it's the sort of process that you start in your placement (and) you are not given an incentive to continue… we expect students to do it…Why are we asking them to do it on placement… if … the rest of the time it doesn't matter' (Meredith).

A minority of participants identified writing for reflective practice.

Charon (2001) writes that in recent years more medical practitioners are learning about how reflective and narrative approaches can help illuminate aspects of a patient›s story, and their own story. They are writing about their patients and their practice in professional journals, in books, and in essays in the lay press (Charon 2001). Social welfare practitioners similarly could revel in writing plays, novels and newspaper articles about their practice, as well as producing reflective writing, and a range of practice-focused writing for publication in professional journals. As Waldman (2005, p.980) contends:

'writing, if rooted in critical reflexivity on everyday practice, enriches and informs the continuous development of social work practice and provides valuable colour and texture to the landscape of the evidence base in social work'.

Many practitioners are well placed to collaborate in writing with their colleagues, and equally, to encourage and support clients to write and publish their stories, or even to co-author publications with client groups.

Healy and Mulholland (2007, p.1) suggested the use of a 'critical friend' to help practitioners publish their writing. Similarly, it is proposed here that an active call for willing social work academics to act as writing mentors or writing buddies might boost practitioners' motivation to write. It is acknowledged that mentoring can infer a lack of competence, when in fact, as noted, a lack of time is the significant factor, although Heron and Murray (2004) argued that barriers to writing for practitioners may include not knowing how to write for publication, and not seeing writing as meaningful for practice. This suggested writing union could maximize joint expertise, and enact the linking of theoretical and practical knowledge across a divide that in reality may be more academic than actual (Heron and Murray 2004). As inferred in the opening quote (Maidment and Milner 2007), in many ways a writing partnership between an academic and a practitioner is an ideal model. Profession-sponsored places in a funded writing program could encourage interested practitioners and academic writing buddies to join forces and enjoy reciprocal motivation, shared skills and knowledge, professional development and even shared publications. A writing program could be supported over time, where measurable writing outcomes might be achieved after an intense workshop to jumpstart writing. Such writing partnerships would provide significant benefits for the field and the academy, while a myriad of ongoing collaborative benefits are equally possible.

This study brings to light the use of creative writing by a small group of practitioners within their professional practice. The limitations of the sample size are acknowledged. Nevertheless, it seems that much more could be done to convince these practitioners, and many other practitioners who need equal convincing, of the great value of their practice wisdom and creativity, and the importance of writing and publishing for the benefit of the profession, their colleagues and future cohorts of students.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings confirm that writing is a vital skill embraced in social work and welfare practice. Creative writing was perceived by practitioners to have empowering, cathartic, and healing benefits for their clients and themselves. Of interest, few participants in this study had considered publishing their work. As such, this creative work is not accessible to their colleagues in practice or available to the academy. Therefore it is not accessible to students. These findings and recommendations have direct relevance for social work and welfare education and practice, and for improved communication across the rhetorical academic/practice divide.

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Social Workers' Experiences of Linking Theory and Practice

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the findings of a Bachelor of Social Work honours research project that explored the importance of theoretical knowledge and the relationship between theory and practice for social workers in the field of health in the ACT and surrounding NSW. The research used a qualitative research methodology to interview six social workers. This study found all participants were effectively linking theory to practice. Participants viewed theoretical knowledge as important to their work and could clearly explain how theory informed their practice. For these social workers, reflecting on practice and supervising students helped increase their awareness of the theoretical knowledge they integrated in their practice. The article considers what is unique about these social workers and how social work educators can encourage students to understand theory and use it to inform their practice.

Keywords: *Health Social Work; Social Work Education; Theory.*

Acknowledgements: *Daniella Bulic, Parveen Kallivath, Joanna Zubrizycki and Thomas Schaefer.*

INTRODUCTION

There is increasing pressure for social work practice to be accountable, cost-effective and based on empirical evidence (Kreuger 1997; McDonald 2006; Miller 2001). This pressure has rekindled concerns about the difficulties social workers face in linking theory to practice and articulating a coherent knowledge base (Mumm and Krestling 1997; Payne 2005; Thyer 2001). It is an opportune time to revisit social workers' ability to link theory and practice.

The present study explores the use of theory by social workers in the field of health. The researcher's perspective as a recent student and early career practitioner is included to consider how an understanding and valuing of theory in practice can be supported post-graduation. Final recommendations consider the role of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) and Continuing Professional Education (CPE) points in promoting sustained engagement with the theoretical and evidence base for practice.

The objectives of the study were to firstly explore social workers' ability to link theory to practice, and secondly, to ascertain how theory informed their practice in the field of health. The research aims were to identify:

- How important the use of theoretical knowledge is in practice for social workers in the field of health in the ACT and surrounding NSW;
- The theories that inform health social work practice;
- The extent to which social workers consciously engage with their theoretical knowledge base; and,
- The challenges social workers experience when using this theoretical knowledge in the field of health.

The inspiration for this study grew from my interest in and valuing of the social work theoretical knowledge base. My placement at a hospital made obvious that the clear use of knowledge and the presentation of evidence behind interventions allowed social work to be more respected and effective. The integration of social work knowledge gave patients a holistic approach to their health and recovery. As a student, many of my peers were disinterested in or intimidated by theories. Now as an early career practitioner I often hear fellow social workers, before they take students on placement, say "I hope they don't ask me about theories". It is concerning that this discomfort with theories has remained despite placement experiences and a number of years of practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review explored two main areas: linking theory to practice in social work and social work in the field of health. Below is a brief summary.

LINKING THEORY AND PRACTICE

To explore the link between theory and practice the review looked at literature on: the importance of informing practice with theory; the history of linking theory and practice in social work; the findings of research exploring social workers' ability to make these links; and strategies to address some of the issues around social work's knowledge base including evidence-based practice (EBP) and critical social work practice.

The social work knowledge base can be divided into three overlapping categories – theoretical, factual, and practical (Trevithick 2005). Theories are an integral part of the social work knowledge base and, given the difficulties social workers have experienced integrating theory into practice, are the focus of this study (Thyer 2001). The theoretical knowledge base is also under pressure due to the push to provide measurable outcomes for social work interventions (Miller 2001). In this study, theory is defined as "knowledge drawn or 'borrowed' from other disciplines, theories that analyse the task or purpose or social work, and practice theories or practice approaches" (Trevithick 2005, p. 28).

The theoretical aspects of social work can be difficult for some students, particularly as many are drawn to the practical nature of the profession (Harms and Connolly 2009). Educators need to impress on students why theory is important. Theories widen a social worker's understanding of client issues and help to organise the complexities of practice (Oko 2008; Trevithick 2005; Walsh 2010). Theories explain behaviour and help practitioners to understand and respond to clients in their environment (Boisen and Syers 2004; Healy 2005; Mumm and Krestling 1997). In addition, theories are a way of transferring social workers' knowledge to others, establishing accountability in practice, and gaining credibility as a profession (Merighi, Ryan, Renouf and Healy 2005). Theories can also challenge the way we view social work and be used to examine the personal beliefs and assumptions that we bring to practice (Harms and Connolly 2009; Oko 2008).

Without theory, a social worker's personal moods and opinions may influence their practice too much (Walsh 2010). Howe (1987) stated, 'To show no interest in theory is to simply travel blind. This is bad practice and unhelpful to clients' (p.9). Osmond and O'Connor (2006) promote informed practice because social workers hold a position of privilege and responsibility in the community, especially in their work with vulnerable people.

Despite the recognised value of the theoretical knowledge base, social work has a history of differentiating the 'theoretical' and 'practice' subcultures (Sheldon, 1978, p. 2). Social work has been criticised for being atheoretical and workers for being 'anti-intellectual and un-interested in theory' (Beresford 2000; Fargion, 2003, p. 517). Harms and Connolly (2009) identify that some of the challenges and uncertainty that students and practitioners face when using theory stems from a belief 'that theory is better suited to the academic discipline than the practical endeavour of social work' (p.5). But the idea of praxis - where

theory informs practice and theory can also be developed through practice – suggest that theory and practice should be seen as interdependent (Everitt 2002; Gray and Webb 2009; Payne 2005).

Researchers are divided on social workers' ability to link theory and practice. Drury-Hudson (1997), Osmond and O'Connor (2006), Sheppard (1998) and Thyer (2001) agree that social workers struggle to articulate their theoretical knowledge base. Articulating the reasoning behind interventions is an important part of being accountable and social workers can only do this effectively when they have a clear understanding of the knowledge that informs their practice (Oko 2008).

Most research has concluded that social workers cannot explain the theoretical basis of their interventions (Thyer, 2001). Thyer (2001) suggests the reason so little practice is theoretically driven is partly due to the lack of outcome-based studies available. Further, he sees the anti-intellectual stance of some social workers to be the result of social work being a practical profession. Studies by Merighi, et al. (2005) and Darlington, Osmond and Peile (2002) however, find social workers had the ability to make effective use of their theoretical knowledge.

In response to the challenge of integrating theory and practice and the high value placed on empirical knowledge, social work has sought to develop a more measurable and practitioner-friendly knowledge base (Edmond, Megivern, Williams, Rochman and Howard 2006; Sheppard 1998). Critical social work practice and evidence-based practice (EBP) are two key responses to this challenge.

In critical social work practice, workers use critical thinking to apply theories, articulate assessments and make decisions (Mumm and Krestling 1997). Critical social work practice promotes informed, conscientious and flexible use of theories and incorporates knowledge from a variety of sources (Payne 2002). Relying on one theory can 'create self fulfilling prophecies', and blind a worker to alternative understandings of a client's behaviour (Walsh 2010, p. 4). The variety of theoretical perspectives that social work draws upon allows practitioners to respond to the uncertainty and complexity of life. Social workers who use a variety of theories can build a deeper understanding of a client's situation and possible options for intervention (Connolly and Healy 2009; Harms and Connolly 2009; Oko 2008). The key criticism of critical social work practice is that social workers may not be informed enough on such a wide range of theories to use them all effectively and safely (Connolly and Healy 2009; Hepworth 2010; Oko 2008).

With EBP, professionals use the most current, scientifically-validated and effective information to support an intervention (Edmond et al. 2006). Social workers who use EBP base their interventions on studies that prove the effectiveness of an approach for treating a particular issue (Walsh 2010). EBP provides a more tangible reasoning for interventions than theoretical perspectives and is a method used and respected by other professions. The key criticisms of EBP are the lack of research available, the time needed to access and review the information, and the risk that the overzealous use of EBP will overshadow the unique nature of each client (Hepworth 2010; Jenson 2005; Plath 2006; Thyer 2001; Walsh 2010).

This study explores social workers' ability to link theory and practice in the field of health. Social workers' knowledge base is not the prevailing discourse within health, and to be effective in this medically dominated environment, social workers must clearly articulate the reasoning behind their interventions (Healy 2005).

SOCIAL WORK AND HEALTH

The health sector challenges the foundations of social work practice. Health is dominated by a scientifically- and evidence-based discourse that differs from the social work perspective (Yip 2004). Further, there are health-wide pressures 'to provide evidence that demonstrates the effectiveness of interventions' and social workers are one of many professions providing services to the same client group (Plath 2009, p. 172). To define its role and sustain its legitimacy within such a competitive practice environment, social workers require well-developed practice skills and a demonstrable knowledge base.

The literature on social work in health identifies three key pressures on social work practice. These are: the influence of the biomedical discourse; multidisciplinary teams; and the pressure to ensure economic accountability (Healy 2005; Miller and Nilsson 2009).

In the health environment the views of social work are often obscured by the dominant medical profession (Yip 2004). The biomedical discourse privileges the knowledge of medical professionals and has the power to label those who deviate from the norm as sick (Healy 2005). This discourse promotes the universality of disease and strives to correct the deviation rather than explore how the surrounding environment could accommodate difference (Healy 2005). The biomedical discourse focuses on biological explanations of disease without recognising the social factors that contribute to a person's wellbeing (Healy 2005). A number of the values, beliefs and theories that underpin social work contrast 'markedly' with the biomedical discourse (McDonald 2006, p. 15; Yip 2004).While medical professionals focus mainly on the presenting health issue, social work provides a holistic lens, encompassing social networks, a client's strengths and the wider environment in which the person is embedded (McDonald 2006).

Social workers have difficulties exerting an influence in health as they are greatly outnumbered by doctors and nurses (Miller and Nilsson 2009). In addition, there is pressure for social work interventions to be brief and inexpensive as health care management is increasingly influenced by economic rationalisation – where minimising cost is paramount (Miller and Nilsson 2009). Cost saving measures can result in briefer access to health care than is ideal, with the individual and the community having to cater for remaining health care needs (Gibbons and Plath 2005; White 2002). Social work's capacity to organise social supports is essential as fewer people are able to provide full-time unpaid care than in previous generations (Berkman 2000; White 2002).

In this challenging environment, social workers need to use their knowledge effectively to ensure psycho-social factors are considered when promoting health outcomes and to legitimise their role in health.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To explore the importance of theoretical knowledge and the relationship between theory and practice for social workers in the field of health, the study used a qualitative research methodology. This methodology, through the use of semi-structured interviews, allowed the researcher to explore the theoretical knowledge base used by the social workers and the challenges they had experienced when using this knowledge in the field of health.

Method: The data was gathered using a semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide used open-ended questions to provide the researcher with a consistent framework, while allowing the participants to share their experiences (Alston and Bowles 2003; Punch 2005). The key questions asked were:

1. Do you think theory is important in your practice? And why?

2. Which theories do you use on a regular basis?

3. Can you give an example of a situation where these theories might be useful?

4. When are you conscious of your use of theory in social work?

5. Can you comment on some of the challenges to using your theoretical knowledge base in the field of health, such as the dominance of the biomedical discourse?

The interview guide was piloted with a fellow social work student to improve the clarity of the questions. The interviews took between 40 and 60 minutes. The interviews were audio-taped and then transcribed. One participant was not comfortable with the interview being taped, so comprehensive notes were taken.

Sample: The sample consisted of six participants who were employed as social workers in the field of health in the ACT or surrounding NSW. The participants were all qualified social workers and had been practicing for a minimum of three years, of which at least the last two were in health. A convenience sampling process was used. The student researcher used their network and the honours supervisor's network to recruit participants.

Data Analysis: The data was processed through a content analysis. From the transcriptions, the researcher developed themes and categories for each of the five questions based on the meanings and interpretations present in the text (Punch 2005; Sarantakos 2005). As one example of the categorisation process, all practitioners reported theories were important to their practice, leading to the development of the theme *'Theories are Important'*. From the transcripts, four key reasons emerged to explain theory's importance. These reasons formed the categories within the theme and relevant quotes from the data were allocated to each category.

An inter-coder reliability process was used to minimise the influence of researcher bias and ensure the data had a level of reliability (Weber 1990).Two coders were given the transcribed data and the generated themes and categories. Each coder independently read

the transcripts and allocated responses to each of the categories within the broader themes. They then discussed their categorisation of the data and conferred to arrive at a consensus for the coding of each response.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study was undertaken with the approval of the ACU National Human Resource Ethics Committee and guided by the ethical principles of research outlined in section 4.5.2 of the AASW Code of Ethics (Australian Association of Social Workers 1999, p. 20). These principles included: ensuring consent was given freely; reporting results accurately; and ensuring participant confidentiality. A detailed information sheet outlining the study was provided to all participants. Informed consent was obtained and the participants were informed they could withdraw at any time. To protect confidentiality, the identity of the participants was known only to the researcher and honours supervisor.

Limitations: There were a number of limitations to the study. The number of participants was limited by the time and resources available to the researcher who was completing an integrated honours year. The results of the study cannot be generalised given the type of sampling used and the small sample size. All the participants were field educators for the university, which may suggest they were more confident or interested in theory than the norm.

Researcher bias is unavoidable in qualitative research. Despite the use of multiple data coders, the researcher's knowledge and biases will have impacted the interpretations of the participants' use of theory.

RESULTS

For these social workers, theory informed their practice in important ways. All participants used a variety of theoretical perspectives and could articulate how theories informed their practice. The interview results for each research question are detailed below and explored more fully in the discussion. Participants have been given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Question 1: Do you think theory is important in your practice and why?

In response to this question two major themes emerged. The first theme was *'theories are important'*. The participants had no doubt about the importance of theory. They identified theories as a means to approach clients holistically, recognise environmental influences on clients, explain social work's role to others, work effectively and efficiently, and provide accountability for practice.

The use of theory to justify social work's role was supported by Dominique's comment, 'there are frequently real challenges for social workers to justify their work, and I think theory can help you with that'. This sentiment was also captured by Emily when she said 'I have to be very clear and firm about where I am coming from to present my argument on behalf of the patient'. Faye drew attention to the importance of 'seeing the person within their environment and cultural context and not imposing our way of seeing the world on that person'.

The basis that theories provide for practice was captured by Chloe's comment, 'you need to have something to support you in the actions that you take because... you're accountable for everything that you do'. Beth reported theories gave workers 'confidence, legitimacy and expertise'.

For the second theme -*'theories are only one part of the social work knowledge base'*- participants identified the importance of the relationship and the need to use critically reflective practice. Many participants talked about the need to be genuine with clients. Faye described 'the relationship' with clients as, 'central to the way you can work with people', noting'the importance of trust, respect and the worth of the individual'.

The tension between theories and the relationship was captured in Dominique's comment, 'if it clashes with your style…don't bother using it, because it is going to come across as false and it's not going to achieve...the results that you want.'. Faye explained the connection between theories and the relationship – 'social work's underpinning theories [are] really about the importance of the relationship'.

Emily, Faye and Dominique valued critical reflective practice as they felt this approach recognised, valued and helped them work through knowledge from a variety of sources - including theories, research, practice wisdom, client expertise and other service providers.

Question 2/3: What theories do you use in practice and can you give me an example of how you might use them?

There were a number of theories used by the participants. The most popular were: *'Narrative therapy*'; *Strengths perspective*'; *'Feminist theory*'; *'Systems/ecological theory*'; and *'Postmodern theory*'.

Narrative therapy was used to draw attention to the client's story and the importance of being heard. The strengths perspective was used to recognise the strengths and resources inherent in each individual. Feminist theory helped participants be mindful of power imbalances, and gender and structural inequalities within the health sector and broader society. The participants did not differentiate between the various forms of feminism, which would have provided more insight into their level of understanding. Systems/ ecological theory helped participants locate clients within their surrounding social systems and identify supports or areas where support was necessary. Postmodern thinking helped participants draw attention to clients' individual experiences and treatment needs.

The *'other theories used'* by the participants included: critical theory; anti-discriminatory/ oppressive practice; cognitive-behavioural therapy; attachment theories; psycho-logical theories of depression; grief and loss theories; developmental theory; role transition; the bio-psycho-social approach; solution focused ideas; crisis intervention; and a humanistic perspective.

Participants talked about the importance of EBP in the health sector and some of its limitations for social work practice. Faye explained, 'within the medical model...it is still very much [about] that evidence base'. Faye felt, however, 'you actually can't provide

definite research and answers around what we deal with; we deal with people and their lives and the complications around their lives'. Emily also stressed the need to 'see each individual as unique'.

For Dominique, she was 'dependent on research', but used this alongside theories and the client's knowledge of their own situation. Dominique found EBP limited in some areas. She felt 'the nature of research can be very one-dimensional' and reported, 'I do read research but sometimes the questions I have haven't been researched yet'.

Question 4: When are you aware of your use of theories?

For this research question, four themes arose. The first theme - *'not aware of theories when with the client'* – was explained by two main ideas. Participants explained theory could take a back seat when they were focused on the task of the day. Alex commented, 'we often get so caught up in actual doing that we don't look at what we're doing and how we're doing it'. Others had become less conscious of theory with more work experience.

The second theme was *'student presence increases awareness'*. All participants had recently supervised students on placement and most said this made them more aware of theory. Supervising students required them to analyse and explain interventions, and almost appeared as a mid-career tune-up for the participants. Chloe reported, 'even when it's busy... you have to give a rationale for your interventions and that's a really positive thing about being a field educator'.

For the third theme - *'reflection on action'* – the social workers identified that they most often reflected on theory during supervision, peer debriefing, and reflection time. This was captured by Alex when she said, 'theories [are] really important in our work but we just don't acknowledge it [until] you do get a chance to sit down and pick a case apart'.

The final theme - *'theories as second nature'* - was the main point of division amongst participants. Some participants were rarely conscious of using theory when working with clients and their theoretical knowledge had largely become second nature. Alex felt most social workers would struggle to articulate their use of theory but if asked to describe their practice the underlying theories would be evident. Beth, however, felt social workers should always be conscious of their use of theory and that it was 'essential for [practitioners] to be linked to theories all the time'.

Question 5: What are some of the challenges to using theories in the field of health, such as the influence of the dominant biomedical discourse?

Five themes emerged from the challenges faced by participants in the health sector. The first theme - *'clash between biomedical discourse and social work values and beliefs'* - was explained by two ideas. Firstly, biological interventions were seen to be prioritised over social interventions. This was captured by Alex, who said, 'it's often hard to even get referrals from doctors because they're focused on the one [presenting health] issue'. Secondly, social work was not seen to be valued within health. Emily commented, 'it's really quite critical, particularly working in a medical environment... to give a really strong argument why we believe in the intervention we are doing'.

The second theme was the challenge of *'differentiating the person from the illness'*. This theme highlighted the social workers' ability to focus on the person not just the illness, and to advocate for the client. Alex said, 'you hear doctors describe... "Ovarian cancer in room 6" and we go "Hang on, don't you mean Mary Blogs who has ovarian cancer in room 6?"'.

The third theme was the challenge of *'time pressures'*. The three ideas supporting this theme were: the need to ensure efficient and cost-effective practice; tensions between social work advocacy and increased length of hospital stay; and time pressures affecting the use of theoretical knowledge.

The time pressures on using knowledge were noted by Chloe, who said, 'we talk about evidence-based practice...but there isn't always the luxury to go and read what is evidence-based or best practice'. Alex discussed the professional tensions when social work interventions increased the length of stay – 'we often get [called] "bloody social workers" because we're holding them up, we are holding up the bed'.

The social work team is often small within the multidisciplinary health environment. Under the fourth theme - *'multidisciplinary interaction'* – participants had to explain the reasons for social work interventions to other health care professionals, and identified the issue of having fewer social workers compared to other disciplines. Beth commented on the 'need to have evidence...to present' to other health professionals for social work interventions to be supported. Faye said, 'having a social work influence is an uphill battle'.

The final challenge - *'the system supports the "expert role"'* – captured two key issues. These were: the system promotes the professional - in particular, the medical - as expert; and the pressure on social workers to show their expertise to the system, while also acknowledging client expertise.

Faye felt social workers were disadvantaged within the health system by not presenting themselves as 'experts'. She said, 'the very nature of how we work puts us at odds with the expert system'. Faye also suggested a way for social workers to manage both their own and their clients' expertise – 'I may know a lot about depression [when talking to health professionals] but I actually don't know about you and depression [when talking to the client]'.

These results offer some interesting insights into social workers' use of theory, particularly in the health sector. These findings are now explored in more detail.

DISCUSSION

The participants saw theoretical knowledge as integral to social work and explained the numerous ways it informed and supported their practice. The participants' ability to explain how theory informed their practice stands in contrast to the conclusions of many studies in this area (Drury-Hudson 1997; Osmond and O'Connor 2006; Sheppard 1998; Thyer 2001). It is valuable to ask why this was the case among these participants. Their ability to link theory and practice provides ideas to strengthen this link more widely across the profession.

Characteristics unique to this sample group may be important in understanding their ability to articulate their use of theory. The field of practice may offer one explanation. In a workplace dominated by the biomedical discourse, health social workers need to clearly justify their interventions (Gibbons and Plath 2005; Miller 2001). Another explanation for their effective use of theory may be the greater focus on theory in social work education in recent years (Trevithick 2003), with four of the six participants graduating less than five years prior to the study. The involvement of all participants in student supervision may be another factor.

These issues are key to the following analysis. The discussion also considers what students and practitioners need to do to ensure theory is linked to practice throughout one's social work career.

THEORY AND THE RELATIONSHIP WITH CLIENTS

Alongside the participants' valuing of theoretical knowledge, they identified the relationship with clients as important to practice and necessary to implement that knowledge. The value of the relationship may be accentuated in health, where social workers are often doing brief interventions and rapport and trust have to be established quickly (Gibbons and Plath 2005).

Certain theories draw attention to the value of the relationship with clients. Theories of postmodernism, social constructionism and narrative therapy respect the individual, their story, and - more broadly - the relationship with clients (Allan 2003; Oko 2008; Walsh 2010). Interestingly, only one participant mentioned using a humanist perspective, which recognises the human need to relate to one another, and places importance on the relationship with clients (Pease 2003). The absence of the humanist perspective may be the result of the variety of language and theories that cover similar concepts, but may also indicate some limitations in the participants' awareness of different theories (Fargion 2003). Discussion of the relationship and how theories support this focus may be a way of engaging practically-minded students in theoretical discussions.

The comments made by participants about only using theories they are comfortable with reflect their desire to be genuine with clients and demonstrate the importance they place on the relationship. However, if workers are rejecting theories because they do not fit with their current practice approach, they may miss the potential for theoretical ideas to widen their vision and improve practice (Walsh 2010). Practitioners who dismiss theories too quickly may also lack awareness of the impact of 'the self' on practice (Walsh 2010).

The participants' high regard for the client relationship and the way they use their theoretical knowledge has remained despite the limited focus on the relationship in recent literature (Trevithick 2003). If this valuing of the relationship is reflected more widely in the profession it may minimise some of the risks associated with EBP, such as devaluing an individual's reality (Parton 2003; Plath 2006). The two participants who mentioned EBP found it valuable in informing practice but reported limitations, including the lack of evidence currently available and the risk that it does not recognise the complexity of people's lives.

THEORIES AND THE HEALTH ENVIRONMENT

The theories participants talked about most were narrative therapy, the strengths perspective, systems-ecological theory, feminist theory and postmodern theory. These are unsurprising given the nature of social work practice in health. Social work interventions in health are characterised by being brief, supporting the transition of clients from the controlled health setting to coping more independently, reducing the chance of clients re-presenting with the same health issue, hearing a client's story, and ensuring an individual intervention that takes into account a client's social environment and strengths (Gibbons and Plath 2005).

Participants used different language to explain the same theories. While Harms and Connolly (2009) identify that theories will look different when used by different workers, establishing more consistency in the language of theory will enable social work to present a more coherent image to other professions and make it easier for students to understand theories (Cleak and Wilson 2004; Fargion 2003; Sheppard 1998).

Analysing the social workers' language revealed the influence of the biomedical discourse – for example, in the use of words such as 'patient' and 'diagnosis'. This may indicate a level of medicalisation (where social workers begin to work within the dominant biomedical discourse rather than offering an alternative social work perspective) (Yip 2004). An alternative explanation, offered by Faye, was that understanding the language of the larger system - and how to use it effectively - is vital to social work practice.

AWARENESS OF THEORETICAL KNOWLEDGE

The participants were most aware of their theoretical knowledge during supervision, peer debriefing, and reflection time away from clients, while many were not conscious of theory at all during client interaction. Payne (2005) promotes using 'theoretical ideas all the time when working with clients' (p. 136). The participants in this study may benefit from being more conscious of theories during client interaction. Reflection while working with the client, including thinking about the theories that are informing an intervention, is a means of changing and responding to the action as it happens (Parton and O'Byrne 2000).

The finding that supervising students increased participants' awareness of theory fits with Lishman's (2002) assertion that participating in the education of students can be a valuable opportunity for practitioners. Students and practitioners have different expertise (Fook, Ryan and Hawkins 1997). Students come from university having recently explored the underlying knowledge base of social work in depth, and practitioners are embedded in the realities of practice. This research suggests the intersection of student and worker expertise may hold an important key to resolving the ongoing issues social workers experience linking theory and practice. Student supervision offers a chance for workers to critically reflect on practice and reconnect with the knowledge that informs it, and allows students the opportunity to ground the theoretical concepts they have learnt in practice realities.

Reflective thinking is central to effective practice and bridging 'the art and science of social work' (Oko 2008; Harms and Connolly 2009, p. 5). Reflective practice helps social

workers decide which knowledge and skills are most appropriate for a particular client and their individual situation. In many organisations, critical reflection is left as an individual pursuit, and it can be easy for workers to lose touch with theoretical debates (Adams 2002; Baldwin 2004; Payne 2005). In the present study, participants reported being suffocated by practice and getting caught up in the 'doing'.

Despite my interest in theories as a student, in my first year of practice I became very focused on the daily demands of practice and did little reflection on the knowledge behind my practice. It was only when I began external social work supervision in my second year and my supervision of social work students in recent years that I reconnected to this knowledge, and improved and updated my practice.

Further exploration of what occurs during student and practitioner interaction may provide important insights into how effective integration might be achieved elsewhere in the profession, and encourage continued involvement in professional development.

CHALLENGES IN THE FIELD OF HEALTH

The field of health demonstrates why the ability of social workers to link theory and practice is so important. Participants reported that the dominant biomedical discourse clashed on a number of levels with the social work profession. Biological interventions were prioritised over social interventions and social work was accorded lesser value. In the face of these pressures, a clear understanding of the theoretical knowledge that informs practice is important to justify social interventions and to promote the importance of social work in health (Gregorian 2005; Mizrahi and Berger 2005). The participants used theories to differentiate the client from the illness, ensure an individual's experience was recognised, and advocate for an individual intervention.

The impact of economic rationalisation in health was evident as participants felt pressured to make interventions cost-effective (Mizrahi and Berger 2005). In the hospital setting this meant quick interventions. When their intervention lengthened a client's stay in hospital, the social workers in this study faced opposition. Participants had to use their theoretical knowledge to demonstrate that an increased stay, in the short term, would minimise the chance of clients re-presenting and lead to long-term cost reduction (Rizzo 2006). For the participants working in community health there was also a heavy focus on cost-effective practice and demonstrating measurable outcomes. The time pressures resulting from the push for economic accountability reinforced the need for these social workers to conduct brief interventions, which limited the theoretical knowledge that could be used. Those theories requiring more lengthy contact with clients, such as cognitive-behavioural therapy, were seen by the participants as difficult to use.

Participants needed to use theoretical knowledge to explain interventions to professionals from other disciplines. This was seen as particularly important given that social workers are vastly outnumbered by other health professionals such as doctors and nurses (Miller and Nilsson 2009). The biomedical discourse is the taken-for-granted approach within health (Healy 2005). Social workers present an alternative, minority, viewpoint and must

articulate this strongly to challenge the status quo and have other ways of seeing and working with the client recognised (Healy 2005; Miller and Nilsson 2009).

A further challenge the participants faced was how to manage their expertise. To function effectively, the participants had to engage in the 'expert role' and demonstrate their knowledge to other health professionals. But the participants indicated that advertising their expertise could undermine attempts to acknowledge clients' expertise. Social workers need to listen to the client's story, work with the client towards a solution and display their expertise appropriately given the situation and audience (Parton and O'Byrne 2000).

Working within an alternative discourse to social work, such as the biomedical discourse in health, makes obvious the need for social workers to be vocal about their knowledge. Social work educators need to consider ways to develop students' skills in verbal articulation of theory to prepare them for the practice environment.

CONCLUSION

The present study reinforces why integrating theory and practice is so important to social work. The demands of the health environment provide key challenges to social work's legitimacy and to individual practice (Healy 2005; Miller 2001; Yip 2004). The social workers interviewed could effectively articulate their use of theory, yet the literature indicates this is not reflective of the profession as a whole (Drury-Hudson 1997; Osmond and O'Connor 2006; Sheppard 1998; Thyer 2001). Relying on the individual capacity of social workers to bridge the gap between theory and practice leaves significant question marks for the overall coherence of the profession and its ability to promote its credibility.

There are few models that help social workers apply theory to practice, despite the consistent difficulties reported in the research (Boisen and Syers 2004). Evidence-based practice goes some way to bridging this gap, but still has limitations (Walsh 2010). The participants in this study, and their ability to link theory and practice, provide insights into how effective links between theory and practice might be achieved more broadly across the profession. The participants were set apart by the particular demands of practising in health and the insights they gained from student supervision. The ability of the social workers in this study to link theory and practice may suggest that when there is a competing ideology in a field of practice, social workers must be able to explain the knowledge behind interventions to work effectively. The value the participants placed on supervising students in helping them link theory and practice shows the importance of this type of reflection. The finding that most participants engaged in reflection on action without reflecting on theories when working with clients suggests there is still room for further development in these social workers' use of theory (Cleak and Wilson 2004).

To determine whether these conclusions can be extended beyond this study, further research may explore the extent to which the effective integration of theory and practice was specific to these social workers and identify potential avenues for enhancing theory and practice integration in the profession more broadly.

This study recommends the need for researchers to:

- Confirm whether these conclusions can be extended to practice in the field of health and participation in student education more broadly, and to the wider social work community.

- Find methods to enhance opportunities for critical reflection on theory and practice integration such as student supervision.

- Promote consistency in the language used to explain social work theories.

Recommendations for those involved in the education of students and the encouragement of ongoing practitioner learning include:

- University-run sessions for supervisors to refresh theoretical knowledge before they take students on placement

- Continuing Professional Education (CPE) workshops and points specifically related to linking theory and practice

- Making it easier for social workers to access evidence-based studies. The AASW could play a role in locating and delivering studies relevant to a social worker's area of practice

- Justifying to students the importance of theory and a clear evidence base for practice

- Using oral examinations to encourage the verbal articulation of theoretical knowledge

- Having students analyse case studies from a variety of theoretical perspectives to show how different theories can allow a multitude of practical approaches

- Emphasising the importance of ongoing professional development and social work supervision

- Encouraging more social workers to gain accreditation by completing the required CPE points. Employers should encourage this continued professional development by subsidising AASW membership fees and development opportunities

In developing the evidence base for social work and improving the links between theory and practice, it is important that, in any formal framework, some flexibility remains. The diversity in social work provides a means to respond to the complexities of society and practice (Parton and O'Byrne 2000). The role of social work educators is to help students understand the importance of the theoretical and evidence base for practice and how to use this knowledge effectively in the reality of practice. This sets the foundation for informed practice throughout one's career and improves the professional standing of social work.

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Negotiating the university environment: How first year students learn about university processes

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to make sense of the literature about how new university students develop an understanding of those university processes that are essential to their academic success. Whereas traditionally there has been a tendency to regard students as deficient if they had transition difficulties, such an approach fails to recognise the complexity of the process and the role of habitus, as explored by Bourdieu (1993), in rendering this task even more difficult for some students. The literature highlights the need for further research.

Keywords: *Tertiary Education, First Year Experience, Bourdieu*

INTRODUCTION

As university teachers, whose responsibilities have included teaching first year social work students and coordination of degree programs, part of our working lives involves responding to situations associated with the transition to being a university student. Most obviously this includes steering students in the right direction as they attempt to negotiate the myriad of academic, administrative and support systems which aim to assist them realise the goal of graduating with a recognised qualification. Nevertheless, it can be risky to assume that when students seek advice they know the range of issues which they are expected to be informed about. For students in their first year, in addition to gaining academic knowledge in their chosen disciplines, they are expected to master information about university admissions and enrolment processes, fees, timetables and being allocated to tutorials and assessment processes including how examinations are organised (Grenfell 2009). Even when there are opportunities for universities to streamline information and processes to make it easier for students to master the environment, these may not be realised (Trotter and Cove 2005).

The context within which students initially engage with higher education is changing, with the process of becoming a university student being increasingly more complex and with greater potential to be problematic. At times, other members of the university may bring individual students to our attention if they have particular concerns. On a systemic level, we may also be required to resource or contribute to university initiatives to orient new students and increase retention rates, or we may find ourselves responding to queries from university administrators about retention rates. However, irrespective of the circumstances in which we are required to address issues of transition, the needs for transitional support have grown in number and complexity. This has, in part, been driven by the transformation of higher education into part of the mass education system, and consequential diversification of the characteristics, aspirations, strengths and needs of students (Smith 2007).

This paper emerges from our attempt to make sense of the literature about how new university students develop an understanding of those university processes that are essential to their academic success, or in other words how they learn to navigate their way through the university systems. From our interactions with social work students, we are aware that our students have lives which are varied and complex with many competing demands, such as juggling study and employment demands. While there has been considerable interest in managing educational transitions (Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes 2009), a number of recent articles have noted a lack of material focussing on students' experiences of becoming university students (Kennedy et al. 2008; Rayle and Chung 2007; Smith and Zhang 2009). Although there is a strong tradition of writing about issues pertaining to higher education within social work, much of this writing about student's experiences of becoming a student is emerging from other disciplines, but highly pertinent for social work educators.

THE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE OF NAVIGATION

There is a growing emphasis in Australian universities on the importance of the first year

experience, and in particular how we might engage with first year students (Krause et al. 2005). This has particularly been the case as higher education has been transformed from an elite to a mass education model and subject to greater funding restrictions and competition. Universities now attract a much more diverse cohort of students (Gale and Trantner 2011).

Considerable efforts have been devoted to developing pedagogical processes which meet the needs of these new university students (Macken 2009), as well as programs to orient new students to universities along with ongoing provision of support to retain them (Burnett 2009). However, while such programs routinely report high degrees of effectiveness, there tends to remain a significant minority of first year students who remain unaware of key university processes and of staff in key roles who could assist them in their transition to university (Burnett 2009).

Until relatively recently, the focus of writing about becoming a university student has tended to be concerned with problems rather than how students have succeeded in navigating this transition. The literature has tended to assume a certain level of competence in new students, such that those seeking assistance were treated as exceptional. In those discussions, typically students were depicted as deficient (Lawrence 2002), lacking in the necessary skills (Smith 2002, 2004; Winterson and Russ 2009) or confidence (Burland and Pitts 2007), rather than a recognition of the complexity of university structures and systems with which they are expected to become familiar in a very short space of time. As such, the process of transition is treated as temporary and readily completed by the successful student.

Instead of focusing on difficulties, there is a growing body of work which is focusing on students accounts of how they have managed the transition to becoming a university student (Beard, Clegg and Smith 2007; Christie et al. 2008; Clegg, Bradley and Smith 2006; Jacklin and Le Riche 2009; Palmer, O'Kane and Owens 2009; Read, Archer and Leathwood 2003). This literature appears to better capture the range of external or informal supports drawn on by students and to better position the transition as part of a broader configuration of social relations. It also provides better recognition of the students' agency and abilities and has the potential to promote a far more neutral approach, or in other words one that does not assume a deficiency within the student. Furthermore, it recognises that the process of engaging with learning and with university life is not linear, and may involve set-backs and 'unbecoming' over time (Ecclestone et al. 2009, p. 7). However, one potential weakness of this approach is a possible exaggeration of the autonomy of the student, without regard to broader structural influences (Clegg et al. 2006).

Perhaps the most promising approach to considering how students navigate their way into university is the work of a number of authors who have drawn on Bourdieu's (1993) concept of 'habitus'. That is:

… the norms and practices of particular social classes or groups…a set of dispositions created and shaped by the interaction between objective structures and personal histories (Thomas 2002, p. 430).

Different social milieus will exhibit different habitus, with that difference reflected in participants' experience of moving between them varying from unconscious and comfortable, to consciously uncomfortable, as Bourdieu put it, a 'fish out of water' (Thomas 2002, p. 431; see also Lehmann 2007, p. 101).

These different habitus can focus on a range of arenas, including peers or friends, family, gender and class. They can also, as Reay et al. (2001) emphasised, focus on particular institutions, such as secondary schools and universities. In terms of transition to higher education, at schools in wealthier areas there may be widespread encouragement of the student body to apply for a place at an elite university as a site of like habitus, whereas schools in poor areas may provide little encouragement even for its brightest students to do so, reflecting, in part, the differences in habitus and relevant 'capital' (Reay, David and Ball 2001). Students who then enrol at an institution with a significantly different habitus to that of, for example, their family or secondary school, are then at risk of not completing their course (Lehmann 2007; Thomas 2002). Equally this applies to adults who may have left school early and return to studies much later in life (Crossan et al. 2003; Gallacher et al. 2002). Conversely those who do succeed, may do so only by rejecting the cultural values – the habitus - of their families and communities of origin (Bland 2002).

TRANSITION FROM WHERE?

The notion of transition assumes that a student has been somewhere else prior to commencing at university, and it is not unexpected that much of this literature pertains to the transition from school to university. A key theme in this literature is the difficulty experienced by many students in losing the familiar, supportive structure of secondary school. The sheer size of the university results in many students experiencing 'feeling lost' (Christie et al. 2008; Hartmann 2001; Jackson 2003), particularly when combined with a dramatic reduction in contact hours (Ballinger 2003; Palmer et al. 2009). Issues of transition occur, even for students whose university studies are close in content to their final school year studies. Those students are required to tackle tasks in a much shorter time period than when at school and are increasingly expected to be 'independent' rather than 'dependent' learners. Furthermore, what university teachers and first year students regard as appropriate levels of direction and support often involve a much greater burden than those students expected (Smith and Hopkins 2005). In light of these various factors, it is unsurprising that the transition to university for school leavers leaves them feeling lost and has been described in terms of a 'shock' (Christie et al. 2008; Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld 2005), being 'disoriented' (Ballinger 2003), and 'struggle' (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003).

To ease the transition into university, a number of writers have suggested the need for closer co-ordination between universities and schools (eg Ballinger 2003; Marland 2003; Smith 2002; Winterson and Russ 2009). While this may not always be feasible, it is worth noting that teachers of final year school students may be providing students with unrealistic expectations as to the level of support they will receive at university (Smith and Hopkins 2005). However, it cannot be assumed that new university students had a positive experience in secondary school. For some students, the repetition of school characteristics

by universities may only reinforce previous negative experiences and adversely affect their transition (Crossan et al. 2003).

Although it has been suggested that students coming straight from school may have greater support needs than other students commencing university (Bartram 2008), a recent Scottish study found that for first time university students, even those who had attended some other form of post-school studies, the transition to university was daunting. In particular, the scale of the university campus, being in classes with hundreds of other students and even the enormity of the library were a shock for new students. As a result, students felt that the university was a large, and at times, off-putting environment; the academic demands made of them were higher than they had anticipated; and they found it difficult to manage the competing demands of university study, home and family, and in many instances, paid employment. (Cree et al. 2009, p. 891)

Difficulties negotiating the transition to study have also been reported among postgraduate students, particularly those returning to study after many years absence. Their new study environment, especially if becoming a postgraduate student or commencing studies in a different field, may be very different from what they experienced in their previous studies, especially if this was many years ago. Describing a phenomenon which they have labelled 'learning shock', Griffiths, Winstanley and Gabriel have commented that:

Many adult students return to an environment that they believe they know from earlier experiences; for many of them, their years as undergraduates may mark some of the happiest of their lives. Returning to education after many years can lead to feelings of confusion, disappointment and disbelief. Far from being a familiar environment, the university or the business school is experienced as an environment at odds with the earlier images, idealized or not, resulting in confusion and possible disappointment. (Griffiths et al., 2005, p. 278)

Some of the factors which were associated with these feelings included being exposed to different methods of learning, particularly those which involved a move away from teacher as expert who imparts knowledge to teacher as facilitator of student learning experiences. Another difficulty was for students who had previously studied in courses where there were right and wrong answers, but were now required to learn processes rather than facts (Griffiths et al., 2005).

Abbott-Chapman and Edward's (1999) claim that diversity is now mainstream is noteworthy here and suggests that the experience of mature-age students is increasingly becoming the norm of student experience, rather than an exception (Clegg et al. 2006; Crossan et al. 2003). The literature concerning mature age students reports less engagement with university processes outside of direct learning activities, given other, conflicting demands, such as paid work and personal relationships (in particular, caring responsibilities). The literature also highlights these students' difficulties in accessing access student support services which have been designed to service the needs of students who have entered the university as school leavers (Tones et al. 2009).

A CONFIGURATION OF RELATIONSHIPS

One key influence identified in the literature is the nature of the student's relationships. There is an extensive literature concerning the significance of inter-personal relationships in the process of becoming a university student. This includes relationships with university staff; relationships with other students; and the influence of broader structural relationships, such as class and gender. Much of this work can be traced back to the ideas of Vincent Tinto (1975, 1987), who drew on Durkheim's theory of suicide to suggest that 'the process of dropout from college can be viewed as a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and academic and social systems of the college' (Tinto 1975, p. 94). Tinto drew on economic theory in presenting individual students as making decisions to drop out on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis. Contrary to the recent emphasis on affect, Tinto's model was much more that of the rational actor from classical economic (and utilitarian) theory. That actor knew his preferences and was able to confidently calculate the advantages and disadvantages of his options. When applied to students in the midst of transition, it suggests a degree of confidence and security that may well be absent, as well as access to relevant information and the ability to assess it. Given that so many students report their experience in the more emotive, uncertain terms of 'feeling lost', their treatment as the mature, secure rational actor of economic theory is difficult to accept.

More recent authors in a similar vein have stressed the importance of 'belonging' (Pittman and Richmond 2008; Read et al. 2003; Yorke 2004) and 'mattering' (Rayle and Chung 2007). Although these may be important for all students, this may be particularly so for students who don't conform to traditional notions of who is a university student (at least in their chosen area of studies) due to their gender (Christie et al. 2008, Jackson 2003), class (Christie et al. 2008; Crossan et al. 2003; Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Read et al. 2003; Reay, Ball and David 2002), ethnicity (Hutz and Martin, 2007, Read et al. 2003; Reay et al. 2002), or rural background (Polesel 2009). Others with particular needs or issues may include students who are the first in their family to attend university (Collier and Morgan 2008; Lehmann 2007), parents (Reay et al. 2002) and international students (Bartram 2008, Ramsay, Jones and Barker 2006; Skyrme 2007).

It is not surprising that commencing students often feel alienated by the university experience. In a study of first year students in Australian universities, one-third were not confident that at least one member of the teaching staff knew them by name (Krause et al. 2005). Relationships with teaching staff have been associated with positive effects on self-reported student learning, student retention and course completion (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). It has also been suggested that students who are known to their teachers are less likely to cheat in their assessment tasks (McKeachie 2002). It is nevertheless recognised that for some students, academic staff are perceived as not supportive or unapproachable (Clegg et al. 2006). Hence, the importance of social relationships with other students has also been stressed by several authors (eg Beard et al. 2007; Christie, Munro and Wager 2005; Crossan et al. 2003; Pittman and Richmond 2008; Ramsay et al. 2006; Rayle and Chung 2007). However, peer relations can be problematic for students who feel intimidated by the perceived talent of other students in their classes (Burland and Pitts 2007).

It has been suggested that one key contribution which higher education institutions can make is the provision of appropriate spaces to facilitate the development and participation in social networks such as accommodation (Wilcox et al. 2005) and 'appropriate social facilities' such as students' union bars (Thomas 2002). Undoubtedly many students benefit from such initiatives. However, focusing primarily on the internal dynamics of the university campus, rather than situating the campus within the diverse dynamics of students' lives may fail to recognise the influence of other relationships on students' lives. It neglects, for example, the fact that financial concerns often result in students spending more time in paid work than on campus (Abbott-Chapman and Edwards 1999; Christie et al. 2005; Leathwood and O'Connell 2003; Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Thomas 2002). Although involvement in paid work doesn't necessarily impact on students' transition to university (Brinkworth et al. 2009), many students seem to engage with university processes on a selective or strategic basis, and with a greater focus upon those seen to be most directly related to their studies and reduced participation in other social activities:

> *… changing conditions of students' lives make more difficult institutional 'socialisation' into the student's role, the creation of student identity and the development of a rich and vibrant campus life. The pursuit of university study is becoming more and more solitary, and less a group activity of a 'community of learners'… More students are becoming 'disengaged' as pressures of employment, financial problems, family and community commitments take their toll, especially for the mature aged, and so becoming a student becomes more and more 'a job of work'* (Abbott-Chapman and Edwards 1999, p. 6).

Consequently, any assumptions that students learn about a range of key university processes and support mechanisms through their relationships with other students and their participation in activities outside of the teaching spaces may need to be reconsidered.

THE DIGITAL ERA

Developments in online and cloud learning, supported by learning management systems such as Blackboard, Moodle or Desire2Learn, are increasingly being heralded by universities for their potential to create virtual learning communities which students can access 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It is now over a decade since Marc Prensky (2001) coined the term 'Digital Natives' to refer to a generation who had spent their lives surrounded by technological tools and gadgets, and for whom he argued, related best to the new ways of thinking and doing enabled by such technologies. Prensky argued that rather than 'Digital Native' students having to adapt to the approaches of their less technologically minded teachers (known as 'Digital Immigrants'), the educational system should be adapting to them. Given that many universities are now providing podcasts of lectures and a range of other learning materials online, to varying extents Prensky's vision is being realised.

Notwithstanding the many benefits of the digital era for learning, an unfortunate possible consequence may be a belief that for many students personal relationships with staff and other students in the university are no longer essential. Furthermore, it is important not to confuse student comfort with information technology with competence, particularly in the learning environment (Blakeslee, Owens and Dixon 2001; Hartmann 2001; Kennedy et al.

2008). Access to, and use of, new information technologies, such as the internet and mobile phones, does not directly transfer to the use of other forms or uses of specialist technologies in the educational setting such as bibliographic databases which provide information about 'unstructured' resources such as books and journal articles (Hartmann 2001). Moreover, among first year university students, there is a significant proportion of who could not be classed as 'Digital Natives' (Kennedy et al. 2008) and the extent to which being a 'digital native' facilitates or hinders transition into being a university student is unknown.

DISCUSSION

The insistence by Tinto and his successors that developing relationships within the university is critical for student retention is no doubt correct. However, how those relationships have been identified and supported appears to have involved some important limitations. These have included a tendency to focus upon the students' personal characteristics, the assumption of a relatively stable and rational self (in the modern, economic sense), a failure to promote any critique of the institution itself and not directly engaging with the students' own experience (Yorke 2004). Furthermore, for some students making a decision to withdraw from their studies may be a positive and appropriate choice (Brunsden et al. 2000).

As university teachers, it is important to acknowledge the sheer complexity of the organisation in which students are expected to become *au fait* within their first semester of study. Universities are very different to the institutions many current teachers enrolled in as undergraduates. The strategies and skills which enabled the successful transition to being university students in the past may not be available or what is required by contemporary students (Clerehan 2003). The context within which students initially engage with higher education is changing, with the potential of making that transition more complex and problematic. The transformation of higher education into part of the mass education system, and consequential diversification of the characteristics, aspirations, strengths and needs of students appears to have dramatically increased and complicated demands for transitional support. To consider one group of students, the emphasis upon examination performance within secondary schools and, with it, the promotion of dependent learning styles, has been argued to fail to prepare students for the more independent approach to learning demanded within higher education. The examination focus in secondary education and, with it, limited preparation for independent learning, seems, however, likely to be amplified by the movement towards assessment of secondary schools' performance and the production of 'league tables'. The capacity of universities to adequately respond to these heightened transitional demands maybe increasingly limited by parallel developments in higher education.

The emphasis upon assessing the performance of educational institutions is also applicable to universities, particularly in terms of student retention. Within the context of long-constrained/reduced funding, and consequently heightened workloads for both teaching and administrative staff, the timely and effective support of the transition of first year

students to higher education is becoming increasingly difficult. The pressure to make savings and efficiencies in transition supports by providing standardized services seems to be increasing at the very time when demands for greater diversity and responsiveness are growing.

These combined pressures heighten the risk of poor student retention. The failure to provide adequate, appropriate transition supports also heightens the risk of replicating in greater detail the oppressive trends of neo-liberal policies within universities. Neo-liberal thought focuses on the individual with little regard to the context in which that individual operates. It assumes the hardy independence and consistent rationality of classical economic theory and provides little or no recognition of the relationships all people rely on in order to successfully act in the world (Jamrozik 2009). Neo-liberal theory takes no account of the inequalities and disadvantages with which so many engage in the world, and has no conception of the influence of those relations, and of emotions, on a person's capacity to act. Managerialist thought, neo-liberalism's accompanying approach to organisational practice, tends to ignore these obstacles and burdens as well, and fails to recognise the additional resources required to adequately address them. Some writers have expressed the concern that a successful transition to university (may require the compliant student to adopt a prescribed identity) will become a question of compliance or of adopting a prescribed identity (Bland 2002; Smith 2007; Thomas 2002) – that is, that of the 'traditional' student. Those students, however, tend to be those enjoying relative cultural and practical advantages, both making for a smoother initial transition to university and better positioning them to confidently engage with the system. There is the heightened risk of failure for the students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds, and for universities influenced by neo-liberal/managerialist thought to locate the cause of these failures in those students rather than the institution itself.. With this, there is the consequential risk of lower retention rates for the non-traditional universities, given their greater emphasis upon, and success in, attracting 'non-traditional' students (see Smith 2007), and hence greater risk of reduced funding for those institutions and consequently a reduced capacity to fund appropriate transition support mechanisms.

NECESSARY RESEARCH

Supporting the first year transition is not simply a matter of service provision by universities (Palmer et al. 2009). In the same way that the transition within lecture halls and tutorials demands a more student-centred approach, the transition outside those formal spheres demands a better comprehension of the manner in which students approach and construct the transition. Without such an appreciation of the students' perspective, it is difficult to be confident that any transition support will be successful.

A student-centred consideration of the transition experience is also driven by other key changes in the higher education environment. Further study, at least for school leavers, is no longer the prolongation of 'growing up', or in other words, a further stage in the preparation for adult life. The imposition of fees and reduction of other financial supports have promoted a greater dependence upon paid employment, and to have promoted a more limited, more instrumentalist approach to study by school leavers which is much

more akin with the literature on 'non-traditional', ie non-school leaver, entrants to university (Christie et al. 2005).

In this changing environment, understanding how students interact with the university, and how they perceive and use support services, is vital. Moreover, the complexity and fragmentation of students' lives requires an understanding that is not limited to their formal learning activities, nor the university's own services and processes. It requires a better understanding of how the students themselves navigate their lives: in particular, how they engage with the range of academic, administrative and support processes within the university and what drives, helps and hinders those interactions, including those relationships ordinarily considered to be external to it, such as employment. Further research to secure that better understanding will need to engage with issues such as the following.

- The complexity and multiple dimensions of interaction between students and support services. This would include locations, hours of operation and cost.

- The tensions involved in the transition, and their ongoing and complex nature, including those arising from the competing demands of students' varied and changing relationships/identities.

- Recognising the character of the transition, and of engagement of supports, as emotional and cultural, and not just as cognitive.

- Specific issues in transition for social work students.

This range of factors also needs to be included in research concerning transitions within university study, ie from new student to later year student to graduate (Willcoxson, Cotter and Joy, 2011).

Bourdieu's (1993) concept of 'habitus', and related concepts of 'financial', 'cultural' and 'social capital', appear to be particularly promising concepts with which to conduct this research. These concepts promote a better recognition of the various spheres in which students are engaged and of the manner in which those habituses provide 'capital' that may – or may not - support a successful transition to university. Bourdieu's framework has the capacity to both recognise the weight and difficulties of those influences, as well as the students' own agency. As a framework for research, it has the capacity to allow a better comprehension of how the difficulties faced by 'non-traditional' students may well now reflect the increasingly complex lives of most contemporary students.

While further research on the process of becoming a university student is undoubtedly required, our encounters with new university students cannot be put on hold pending the outcomes of such research. It is likely that such encounters will continue to variously intrigue, surprise and confound us as we contemplate the implications of such interactions for us as university teachers. Hopefully, they will also challenge any inclinations we might have to believe we fully understand the process of becoming a university student and remain open to furthering our understanding of this very complex process.

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Considering the spiritual dimension of human life and its relevance to social work education: Social workers', educators' and students' views.

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ABSTRACT

While the spiritual dimension of human life is a topic which has begun to be explored by social work researchers in recent times, it remains largely ignored in social work education. This is in spite of the fact that, as the literature suggests, spirituality is an important component of many peoples' lives. This study explored social workers', social work students' and social work educators' views regarding the relevance of incorporating a spiritual component into the Bachelor of Social Work curriculum. Ten people participated in this qualitative study which provided rich and in-depth data from semi-structured interviews. Although the findings are unable to be generalised to all social work students, workers and educations, a number of suggestions for future social work education have been recommended. The research concludes that there is a place for the acknowledgment and exploration of clients' spiritual beliefs as well as reflection on students' own spiritual beliefs in social work education today.

Keywords: *spirituality, social work, social work education, diversity*

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades there has been a resurgence of interest in the topic of spirituality and how it relates to social work practice and education. Despite the fact that social work is deemed to be committed to working with the whole person, spirituality is an area which seems to be largely ignored (Furman, Benson, Grimwood and Canda 2004: Gardner 2011; Holloway and Moss 2010). The evidence based approach that has become prominent within the social work profession and education has been challenged by many as antithetical to social work's commitment to holistic practice (Cornett 1992; Crisp 2010; Holloway and Moss 2010; Rice 2002; Sheridan, Wilmer and Atchison 1994). Tacey (2003, 199) coined the term "spirituality gap" to describe the gap that exists between patients who report spirituality to be an important element of their lives and doctors or health workers who either do not relate to this element, or feel that it is unprofessional to enter into the spiritual discourse. The purpose of this study was to discover whether this gap also exists within the social work profession and in particular in social work education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From religion to secularisation to spirituality

Social work has its roots in concepts of charity and moral rehabilitation, with a strong Christian base (Sahlein 2002, p. 385). Church based volunteers, known as the 'friendly visitors' were the first social workers in England. Their work began in the early 1800's and continued until the early twentieth century (Chenoweth and McAuliffe 2005, p. 26). The religious command to 'love thy neighbour' can be attributed to motivating those of faith towards social caring, forming the beginnings of the caring professions (Holloway and Moss 2010, p. 11).

With the increasing secularisation of Western society as well as an increased focus on scientific rationalism, other more intuitive forms of knowledge have been devalued by the social work profession in recent times (Furman et al. 2004; Sahlien 2002; Sheridan et al. 1994; Trevithick 2008). A strong emphasis on evidence based practice and professionalisation has become evident, arguably in an attempt to come into line with other disciplines, such as psychology (Chenoweth and McAuliffe 2005, p. 27). As a result, a discomfort around spiritual issues and a desire to lose any identification with anything outside the professional sphere and scientific paradigm has arisen (Sheridan et al. 1994, p. 373).

Sahlein (2002 p. 386) also points out the powerful influence Freud's work has had, and continues to have, on the fields of psychology and social work. Freud's commitment to unyielding rationalism is evident in his argument that religious practices and beliefs have at best no effect, or at worst an adverse effect on mental health (1907, p. 117). However, Cornett (1992 p. 101) points out that spirituality is no less clearly definable than many concepts which are already accepted by the psychology profession; such as the ego and the self.

As a result of an increasingly individualised society, a world has been created in which people feel alienated and at risk. This sense of alienation and uncertainty has given rise to a renewed search for spiritual ideas that may assist in restoring a sense of safety, meaning and purpose in peoples' lives (Gray 2008, p. 181) This renewed interest in spirituality, as it relates to social work practice and education, began to become evident in the literature of the late 1980's with Sheridan and Amato-Von Hermert's (1989, p. 298) major USA study, which defined spirituality as 'The human search for purpose and meaning of life experiences, which may or may not involve expressions within a formal religious institution'. Religion, however, can be defined as 'an organized structured set of beliefs and practices shared by a community related to spirituality' (Zahl, Furman, Benson and Canda 2007, p. 298). While some argue that spirituality is outside the bounds of religion (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, p. 12), for the purpose of this study I chose to use the broad definition of spirituality provided by Sheridan and Amato-Von Hermert (1989, p. 298), as it encompasses traditional religious beliefs, whilst at the same time allows for alternative views. This study supports Crisp's (2010, pp. 13-14) assumption that everybody is spiritual in the sense that all people derive some sort of meaning for their life which guides their actions.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SPIRITUALITY IN HUMAN LIVES

Gallup and Castelli (1989) conducted a study in the USA which revealed that for more than one third of the population spirituality is the most important aspect of existence and among disadvantaged and marginalised people of colour spirituality is an even greater strength. For many clients spirituality is the central dimension in their lives that informs and impacts on all others (Pierpont and Hodge 2003, p. 563) A questionnaire completed by 53 social work faculty members in the USA reported that 40 respondents agreed that spirituality is a fundamental aspect of being human (Dudley and Helfgott 1990, p. 128). A further study conducted by Derezotes (1995) found that 92% of 340 social workers surveyed in Utah and Idaho considered spiritual issues in practice to be important. Derezotes (1995, p. 12) acknowledges, however, that these cities are situated in the 'bible belt' area of the USA and therefore may not be representative of the total population of the country.

THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

The Australian Association of Social Work (AASW) also recognises the important place that spirituality has in the lives of many people and the need for social work to pay attention to this. This is evident in the AASW Code of Ethics (2010, p. 18):

Social work will recognise, acknowledge and remain sensitive to and respectful of the religious and spiritual world views of individuals, groups, communities and social networks …

Several Australian social work academics have introduced discussions focused on spirituality in social work literature in recent years (Crisp 2010; Gale, Bolzan and McRae-McMahon 2007; Gardner 2011; Lindsay 2002) An Australian study conducted by Lindsay (2002) surveying 138 social work academics, supported many of the studies already mentioned, arguing that spirituality is an important part of the human condition. A

course on spirituality was introduced at The School of Arts and Critical Enquiry at Latrobe University, Melbourne by Tacey (2003). Tacey (2003, p. 93) claimed that the level of student interest and motivation was unusually high and stated that:

Discussions in tutorials are animated and conversations frequently spill over into lunch times and after hours. The reason it works so well is because the ideas are emotional and have existential purchase on the students' minds and hearts. It is the only subject I have taught where the numbers do not decline after a few weeks. In facts enrolments often increase.

Tacey's course was not part of a social work program and therefore, it cannot necessarily be assumed that social work students would hold the same level of interest and enthusiasm. However it does seem reasonable to believe that this may be the case.

Gardner (2011) also strongly recommends social workers learn to engage in exploring spirituality through critical reflection, providing detailed suggestions for engaging in this process.

It is also of significance to point out that 85% of the population have some form of religious or spiritual affiliation (Burke 2002, p. 7). Census figures also report a decline in Christianity and a rapid rise in Buddhist, Hindu and Pagan populations in Australia over recent years, with increases of 17%, 55% and 45% respectively from 2001 to 2006 (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2008). In spite of living in an increasingly individualistic, technological and materialistic society, seven in ten Australians continue to believe in God or some form of higher power (Zwartz 2003). This data, therefore, supports many of the studies provided in the literature which suggest that spirituality is increasingly becoming an important aspect of life for many people (Derozotes 1995; Dudley and Helfgott 1990; Gallup and Castelli 1989; Pierpont and Hodge 2003).

SPIRITUALITY AND DIVERSITY

Hodge (2005, p. 49) raised the issue of how spirituality fits into social work's commitment to valuing diversity, arguing that until spiritual diversity is addressed in the same manner as other areas of diversity, social work education cannot be seen to be egalitarian in its approach. Although, as already revealed, Westerners' views on spirituality are becoming more diverse, the prominent spiritual expressions within Western society are secular or liberal protestant. Therefore in order for social work to remain true to the principle of recognising diversity it needs to create an awareness of how non-dominant faiths are oppressed in the same way that other marginalised groups are oppressed (Gardner 2011; Hodge 2005, p. 43). This view is supported by Dudley and Helfgott's questionnaire study (1990, p. 134) which revealed that 92% of 53 respondents agree that the diversity rationale for learning about spiritual belief systems is important. Ife and Tesoriero (2006, p. 248) stated that 'for Indigenous people the sacred and spiritual transcend all of life and human experience' and an understanding of these peoples' spirituality is vital if practice is to be effective.

INCORPORATING SPIRITUALITY INTO THE SOCIAL WORK CURRICULUM

It is revealed that social work students and social workers in the USA and UK are generally in favour of incorporating spirituality into the social work curriculum (Canda, Nakashima and Furman 2004; Dudley and Helfgott 1990; Graff 2007; Sheridan and Amoto-Von Hemert 1999). Canda et al's (2004, p. 785) study reported that 236 of 250 social workers surveyed, supported the inclusion of spiritual content in social work education. Furman et al. (2004, p. 786) revealed that the majority of the 5500 UK social workers surveyed believed that it is important to be educated about the beliefs and practices of various spiritual belief systems in order to understand the context in which clients operate. Zahl et al's (2007, p. 299) survey of 2069 UK and Norwegian social workers showed that whilst the majority of respondents believed it to be important to be knowledgeable about spiritual matters, only 28% of the UK respondents and 19% of Norwegian respondents felt that social workers possess the skills to address these issues. The fact that this survey produced only a 26% response rate may indicate, however, that only those who viewed the topic to be important participated in this study. Closer to home, Lindsay's (2002) survey of Australian social work educators found that while a few participants were strongly opposed to including spiritual content in the social work curriculum, most acknowledged its relevance.

Despite the acknowledgement that spirituality plays an important role in the lives of many people, discussion and implementation of practice principles relating to spirituality appear to be largely absent from social work curricula (Canda et al. 2004; Furman et al. 2004; Sheridan and Amoto-Von Hemert 1999). Pilot interviews with UK social work teachers revealed that even though teachers are aware of the important role spirituality plays in the lives of people there is 'a pervading sense of these subjects being too dangerous, too personal, too embarrassing, too old-fashioned, too uncertain or just too difficult to discuss'(Gilligan 2003, p. 76). Such views fail to consider the important fact that the spiritual beliefs of social work clients may provide a powerful source of strength and resilience in difficult times (Holloway and Moss 2010, p. 71). Conversely, avoidance of 'spiritual talk' in social work interactions may neglect to recognise the negative and destructive effects that spiritual beliefs may have on the lives of some people (Holloway and Moss 2010 p. 39).

HOW SHOULD SPIRITUALITY BE INCORPORATED INTO SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION?

Suggestions from Furman et al's (2004) UK study on how spirituality should be incorporated into the social work curriculum include the following: having an understanding of a variety of spiritual beliefs and practices; gaining an understanding of negative and positive impacts of spirituality; and gaining knowledge concerning how to handle these issues in an ethical manner. Respondents from the USA study conducted by Canda et al. (2004, p. 39) comment on the importance of developing a clear awareness of their own spiritual belief systems and values, views and biases relating to spirituality in order to keep biases in check and to prevent them from inadvertently imposing their own beliefs on their clients. A major concern was raised by respondents in several studies that discussing spiritual issues with clients may result in social workers breaking ethical codes

by proselytising (Furman et al. 2004; Gilligan 2003; Graff 2007; Sheridan and Amoto-Von Hemert 1999). However, to minimize or ignore spiritual dimensions of a client's experience may result in a reverse form of proselytising (Furman et al. 2004, p. 788). It is important to note that suggestions made in the literature that spiritual assessments be carried out and spiritual conversations be had, do not involve the social worker imposing their own views onto clients unless explicitly sought by the client. It is, therefore, also important to ensure that education addresses this concern and does not promote any one belief system over others (Hodge 2005, p. 39).

AIM AND JUSTIFICATION OF PRESENT STUDY

The aim of the present study was to determine if Australian social work students and social workers perceive a 'spirituality gap' in the social work curriculum and if so, how they believed it can best be bridged. The research questions which stem from this aim are as follows.

Do social workers and social work students see spirituality as a relevant part of social work practice?

Should spirituality be incorporated into the social work curriculum and if so how should this be done?

As little research has been conducted in regards to the relevance of incorporating spirituality into social work education in Australia to date, the present research presented a valuable and timely opportunity to explore this issue. In addition, most previous studies have been in the form of surveys and questionnaires. Whilst such research provides data from a large and varied sample, these methods may lack the rich and comprehensive data that results from a one-on-one interview. Through in-depth interviews, it was anticipated that this study would highlight a gap in the social work curriculum and provide valuable information to Australian universities in regard to ensuring that the curriculum is meeting the needs of its students and the clients who they will be working with.

METHODOLOGY

I approached this research through a post-modern lens. As such, I acknowledged that the views of participants are socially constructed, rather than representing absolute truth. While I believe that being open to the spiritual aspects of peoples' lives is necessary in order to engage in holistic social work practice, I was fully prepared to accept that others may not share this view. I attempted to frame my questions in a way that did not reveal my bias. I also respected the unique views of participants and held an expectation that my own truths may be challenged and changed as a result of the findings. This was certainly the case. While I entered this study with an idea of spirituality as being about holding beliefs around a transcendent reality, I soon realised that for some, the spiritual can encompass the everyday, practical, earthly pursuits such as feeling compassion for another or making someone a cup of tea. In order to establish the subjective beliefs and opinions of participants and to discover the individual truths participants hold, an inductive qualitative approach, in the form of semi-structured interviews, was employed. While a semi-

structured interview may not seem to be in line with a post-modern approach I believed that it was necessary to provide some structure to the interview, considering the somewhat abstract nature of the topic. The questions were, however, broad and used only as a guide and participants were encouraged to speak freely about the topic so that I could capture other views that were important to them. Questions included the following: Do you believe that your framework for practice allows for a spiritual component and if so, how? Have you had any experiences on placement or in practice where spiritual issues were raised by the client? Do you believe that adding a spiritual component to the social work curriculum would be beneficial? If so, how is this best achieved?

RECRUITMENT

I recruited participants for this study by inviting volunteers during a presentation of the research proposal to students undertaking the Bachelor of Social Work degree at the University of Tasmania, Launceston campus. Through word of mouth I was also approached by experienced social workers who were interested in the research and offered to participate. Lecturers and tutors from the University of Tasmania's School of Social Work, all of whom are qualified social workers, were also canvassed by email.

In total 10 participants were selected for this study, consisting of four fourth year social work students and six experienced social workers. Fourth year students were chosen because they have completed the theoretical part of the course, have practiced critical reflection and have begun to establish a framework for practice. It was also believed to be important to speak with experienced social workers and social work educators, in recognition of the fact that they are also key stakeholders in regards to how social work education is delivered. Maximum variation sampling was used whereby certain participants were chosen from those who volunteered on the basis that a diverse range of religious and spiritual views would be included. While I acknowledge that knowing someone's religious view is not the same as understanding one's spirituality, I wished to potentially highlight the commonalities that would become apparent, in spite of different belief systems. A wide age range was also chosen in order to ensure that generational differences were accounted for.

A PROFILE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The social work students selected consisted of fourth year students currently enrolled in the Bachelor of Social work course at The University of Tasmania. The social workers that participated have worked in a diverse range of practice settings, such as hospital, domestic violence, mental health, education and youth justice. Four of the experienced social workers have also been employed as lecturers or tutors, at the School of Social Work at The University of Tasmania. Participants ranged in age from 26 to 49 years and consisted of eight females and two males. Of the 10 participants one was a member of The Baha'i Faith, one a Christian, another identified as an atheist, four were agnostic, one adhered to Buddhist principles and two had an interest in new-age spiritual beliefs. The nature of the maximum variation sampling method may have resulted in a larger number of participants who affiliate with religious or spiritual ideas than a random sample would have produced.

PROCEDURES

The semi-structured personal interview was selected as the means of data gathering. Six basic questions were used to guide the interview. The questions were all framed as open questions allowing for participants to respond in a way which reflected their own individual perceptions, meaning and experience. Key questions elicited participants' views on the importance of spirituality in peoples' lives, particularly when working with diverse groups as well as views on incorporating spirituality into the social work curriculum. There was also room for free discussion outside the more structured parts of the interview. Participants were given copies of the interview questions two weeks prior to the interview. Due to the rather complex and abstract nature of the topic this allowed participants to consider their views and responses, ensuring that the data had depth. Nine interviews were conducted face-to-face by the researcher in a private room at the Launceston campus of the University of Tasmania and one was conducted by telephone. The duration of the interviews was approximately one hour. Issues regarding confidentiality and withdrawal were explained.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data was analysed using the inductive thematic analysis method described by Braun and Clark (2006, p. 12), where the themes identified are strongly linked to the data rather than being purely driven by the research question. I became familiar with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts. Initial codes were then recorded on transcripts and transferred to a spread sheet in order to keep track of arising patterns and to begin identifying themes. I also noted differences within the data and considered 'the overall analysis the story tells' (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.87).

FINDINGS

Several key themes emerged during the data analysis process. The first themes that I will present emerged from discussions around frameworks for social work practice and participants' ideas around the relevance of spirituality within their individual frameworks. The second section will then discuss the themes that emerged from more specific discussion relating to the relevance of incorporating spirituality into the social work curriculum.

FRAMEWORKS FOR PRACTICE

Eight participants strongly believed that there should be a spiritual component to their framework for practice. They talked about the fact that spirituality is a part of who they are and how they try to operate in the world and that this aspect of themselves cannot be separated from their practice frameworks. The following sub-themes emerged.

CARE AND COMPASSION

Five participants discussed how the concepts of care and compassion were crucial to their practice frameworks. While care and compassion are values promoted by the social work profession and are central to many models of interpersonal practice, the participants that spoke about these values indicated that they came from within themselves rather than

simply being principles that are followed. In the view of these participants, compassion and care are spiritual in nature.

My spiritual beliefs extend my framework of anti-oppressive practice...whenworking with people who are so vulnerable I think that it's vital that we come from a place of love and compassion (Participant 4).

This participant interpreted their spiritual framework as being aligned with anti-oppressive social work theory, the main theory that informed their practice. Others saw their spiritual beliefs as fitting with principles of human rights and social justice.

PUTTING ETHICS INTO ACTION

Participants also reported that incorporating spirituality into their frameworks for practice is about putting ethics into action. Several participants commented on the fact that the code of ethics is implicitly spiritual and principles such as non-judgment, compassion, and respect for human dignity and self worth are in line with the basic values of most spiritual world views. One participant talked about the important role reflective and reflexive practice play in ensuring that ethical principles are not just given 'lip service'.

PRACTICING HOLISTICALLY

Just as most participants believed that their spiritual dimension could not be separated from other dimensions of themselves they also argued that it is necessary to consider the spiritual dimension of the client, in order to practice in a holistic way.

We are beings of body, mind and spirit ... even people who don't see themselves as spiritual. I think most people are still searching for meaning (Participant 3).

This quotation supports arguments presented in the literature review regarding spirituality and holistic practice (Furman et al. 2004; Gardner 2011; Holloway and Moss 2010).

VALUING SPIRITUALLY SENSITIVE PRACTICE

Participants also talked about the relevance of learning to assist clients to make meaning of difficult situations such as the death of a loved one, or the prognosis of a chronic or terminal illness. Participants shared practice experiences which highlighted the importance of practicing in a spiritually sensitive way. All participants discussed the importance of primarily providing support to the client and allowing them to guide the conversation.

Whilst all participants were open to the idea of helping clients find meaning in difficult circumstances it was stressed that it is about practicing in a way which supports the client to find their own meaning rather than imposing their own views onto the client. Four participants believed it to be important to open up discussion around meaning making, particularly when working with people who are bereaved or terminally ill. One participant provided an example of how these conversations can happen and the benefits that can arise:

When working in a children's hospital with children dying, I would talk to parents about what they thought happens when someone dies and explore it from their perspective. What I invariably found by giving people the room to vent they would invariably come up with something. I remember a dad saying 'There is nothing there, when you die it is the end of story' but then he came to the understanding himself that his son was going to be the brightest star in the sky ... and he sent me a card and put it from 'the brightest star in the sky' ... so just by having that opportunity to talk, to open up and explore and be able to say it sucks if necessary and to work through a process, people often come up with a meaning for themselves. That's what matters (Participant 5).

Six participants reported that they would not actually open such discussions and would only explore spiritual issues if the client raised them.

I don't necessarily introduce it but I am working with a young girl at the moment who is 14 and her belief in Christianity has very much helped her to manage some awful, awful situations of abuse (Participant 9).

This participant reveals how being open to spiritual conversations can be helpful for social work clients.

Most participants talked about whether or not they would reveal their own beliefs if questioned by the client. Six participants reported that they would be open about their views if asked, although they would make it clear that the client was not expected to accept their view as truth and that the client would not be judged in any way for having different beliefs. Participant 6 talked about a placement experience as follows:

I was working with a social worker and she was talking to an older womanwhose husband had died and she said, 'Do you believe in God'? I would have said 'Yes', and for me that would have been an interesting topic to talk about. And she [the older woman] brought it up and she talked about how she prays and everything, but I was very surprised by the reaction of the social worker, who didn't say yes or no but said something just to avoid the question. She just withdrew as if it wasn't appropriate to talk about it. If we don't go there and it is important to the client then it is a waste of an opportunity (Participant 6).

This participant highlights the discomfort that some social workers can feel around engaging in spiritual conversations.

SPIRITUALITY AND THE SOCIAL WORK CURRICULUM

While most participants reported that they believed that there is a place for spirituality in the social work curriculum and were able to articulate why, recommendations as to how this should happen were fairly general. However, several themes did emerge from the discussion.

Teaching reflection on our own beliefs

All participants believed that it is crucial for social workers to have a basic understanding of their own spiritual views in order to ensure that they do not impact negatively on clients. Ways in which the curriculum could address this issue ranged from discussion in

interpersonal and practice and theory units to including a specific unit.

It is about knowing where you come from ... and being aware of how that impacts on other people and how your world view can have a big impact. I have seen spirituality and religious beliefs do a lot of good and I have also seen them do a lot of harm and I am really fearful of that. I find myself feeling ill about that (Participant 2).

When I was a student there were quite a few students who were quite religious and it surprised me a bit because sometimes they were quite judgmental about other people (Participant 9).

Get students to think about what spirituality is and run an assignment on that, using questions such as, What is it? How is it defined? How does that shape your practice? How will that impact on your client (Participant 10).

These quotes suggest a need for reflection around social workers' own spiritual belief systems in order to ensure that beliefs neither harm the client nor detract from the needs of the client.

Teaching spiritual belief systems

Several participants raised concerns about teaching specific spiritual belief systems. Five participants believed that attempting to do this would result in privileging certain beliefs over others. Others believed that it is important to learn about specific beliefs, especially when working with certain groups such as Indigenous Australians. It was generally thought, however, that such knowledge would be best learned independently, outside of the standard curriculum. Three participants reported that the best way to learn about how spirituality impacts on a client's life is to simply talk to them about it and argued that this can only be achieved in practice.

Naming up spirituality

Four participants expressed the view that in many ways spirituality is already covered in the Tasmanian curriculum, however, is not named up as such. The emphasis placed on connecting with the client, being client-centred, practicing non-judgment and being compassionate and empathic are all considered by most participants to be potentially spiritual in nature. Two participants talked about how narrative therapy, solutions focused brief therapy and the strengths perspective can be interpreted as having a spiritual dimension and considered that this dimension contributes to their appeal as effective practice models:

I think naming it up [spirituality] makes us conscious it is there and makes us conscious of the good things it can bring (Participant 8).

It is often implied in the course that there is a basis to the stuff on self reflection and it is spirituality. I think we have to be honest and say what it is ...why can't we do that? A lot of things we talk about are based on spirituality like the strengths perspective and we are happy to draw from (Participant 10).

Potential difficulties

Two participants were concerned that introducing spiritual reflection to social work education may be seen as threatening or unnecessary by some students and as a result may act as a deterrent to entering the course. One participant also believed that because spirituality is difficult to define and means such different things to different people it could be an enormous challenge for some students to even 'go there'.

DISCUSSION

It is evident from this study that participants considered spirituality to be an important dimension of human lives, supporting findings from Hodge (2005), Derezotes (1995) and Lindsay (2002). Participants who have had spiritual conversations with clients acknowledge that spiritual beliefs can be an important resource and strength to tap into during difficult times. This is especially the case when there appears to be no tangible solution to a problem.

The findings of this study also support Furman et al. (2004) and Gilligan's (2003) studies, revealing that participants do not believe it is appropriate to impose one's own beliefs onto clients and care must always be taken to avoid this. Additionally the findings also reveal that the participants in this research believe it to be important for students to develop a clear sense of the beliefs they hold in regards to spirituality and how those beliefs guide their practice frameworks and potentially create conflicts in their practice. These views echo the findings of Canda et al. (2004) and Zahl et al. (2007). They also strongly support Gardner's (2011) ideas regarding the promotion of critical reflection on spiritual issues. The findings of the present research suggest that the primary focus on spirituality in the social work curriculum should be around assisting students to reflect on and understand their own beliefs in regards to spiritual matters. A lack of such understanding may prove to be problematic. The worker may inadvertently impose their own beliefs onto the client or fail to recognise the influence spiritual beliefs have on the client's life; possibly providing a valuable resource to draw on. Whilst there is some concern expressed that introducing spiritual discussion into the curriculum may result in students displaying resistance and fear, the general consensus is that it is a beneficial and necessary component of the curriculum.

While much of the literature suggests there is value in learning about specific belief systems and practices (Dudley and Helfgott 1990; Furman et al. 2004; Hodge 2005; Ife and Tesoriero 2006) this study does not support such views. The findings of this study argue that an attempt to do so would result in certain belief systems being privileged over others, as it would be impossible to include them all. Instead, it is suggested that pedagogy should be developed around the importance of being open to different spiritual beliefs and being prepared to undertake independent study when working with certain groups or individuals. It is also argued that the best way to learn about an individual's belief system is to gain the knowledge first hand from the client.

It should also be noted that the interview process itself appears to have been beneficial for those who participated. The overwhelming interest and enthusiasm in the topic supported Tacey's (2003) findings and indicates that adding a spiritual component to the social work

curriculum may be on the whole welcomed by students. 'This is such a great topic' was a typical response at the start of each interview and provides a clear indication how timely this study is.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Some recommendations can be tentatively made on the basis of the present study. Social work educators may benefit from embracing the addition of a spiritual component to the curriculum. The importance that spirituality has as a dimension of human life for many and the way in which it can act as a strength and resource in difficult times should be acknowledged and celebrated. As mentioned in the findings, spiritual exploration complements the theories embedded in models which are taught in current social work courses, such as narrative therapy and solutions focused brief therapy.

Spiritually sensitive practice should be viewed as another skill to be stored in the tool-box of social work students. Educators need to become aware that spirituality is not necessarily about religion as such and that almost everyone has the need to make sense of their lives in some way – to find a meaning or purpose in order to continue to survive in the face of inevitable adversity. Northcut (2004, p. 349) developed a framework for teaching religion and spirituality in social work which fits well with the views of the participants in this study. Northcut (2004, p. 349) suggests that social work pedagogy emphasizes the development of:

- Increased comfort with the subject of spirituality.
- Increased ability for self-reflection and self-knowledge.
- Enhanced ability to learn how to listen for spiritual themes in client narratives.
- Strengthened skills for clinical intervention with clients around the subject of religion and spirituality.

Northcut (2004, p. 357) states that:

Creating a space for spirituality in the social work classroom does not require gargantuan pedagogical feats. A willingness to address the subject matter, as well as an ability to utilize what we know works in fostering learning and growth, give us the necessary instructional tools to accomplish important education goals.

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

A small sample size resulted in this research being limited in its ability to explore as many views as possible. As six of the participants in this study were affiliated with a particular religious or spiritual belief system, the views presented in this study may not be upheld in a larger and more varied sample. Also, the voluntary nature of this study may have attracted participants who had a keen interest in the topic, resulting in a biased sample. The fact that participants were all Tasmanian may also seem to be a limitation of this study; however this

factor was countered to some extent by recruiting some participants who had moved to Tasmania in recent years from overseas or other states of Australia.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Future researchers interested in this area may benefit from interviewing social work clients and exploring their views around spiritual issues with workers and considering whether they believe social workers are equipped for, or open to, such explorations. It may also be beneficial to explore the conflicts that students and workers who adhere to strict religious beliefs face in their study and practice of social work and how they reconcile these beliefs in the face of the social work Code of Ethics. A replication of this study which includes a larger sample may also be useful in order to assess whether the results differ. A sample which is more representative of the Australian multicultural community may also be beneficial.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion the findings of this study support the bulk of the literature on this topic and answer the research questions asked. Whilst the Tasmanian social workers, students and educators interviewed in this study believe that social work education should focus primarily on students' reflections of their own beliefs and developing the skills to incorporate spiritually sensitive practice rather than learning about specific belief systems, they do suggest that there is a place for spirituality in social work education in Australia today. While the importance of evidence-based practice should be respected, there is also room for practice which takes into account the more intuitive aspects of the human experience. The role of the social worker is to genuinely connect with others and this is difficult to achieve if an important aspect of many peoples' lives is ignored. Just as it is important to understand the implications of a client's ethnicity, culture, sexuality or any other form of diversity, it is also important to explore spirituality. According to the results of this study, discussion around the potential importance of spirituality in the lives of many people is something which is missing from the social work curriculum, revealing that a gap is indeed identified; a gap that needs to be filled.

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Encouraging human services and social work students to 'go bush' for clinical placement and employment

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ABSTRACT

Encouraging and supporting students to undertake rural or remote placements can provide significant learning experiences and opportunities for students, while also responding to the social justice and equity needs of rural and remote communities. However, there are several barriers that deter students from engaging in rural and remote field placements. Consequently, using an online education tool, the project team sought to: (i) educate students about the economic, social and health issues of rural and remote Australia; (ii) maximise student engagement and learning in rural and remote practice and; (iii) inform students about opportunities to 'go bush' to work both as a student and professional. It was hoped that enhanced knowledge in this area would lead to an increase in the number of students on rural and remote placements. Findings from a range of measures indicated that the tool increased student interest in rural and remote practice, with more students undertaking rural and remote placements in the 12 months following the launch of the tool. This paper reports on the project design, implementation and evaluation.

Keywords: *Australia; field education; social work; rural health; rural practice.*

INTRODUCTION

Field education in rural and remote areas of Australia provides personal, professional and educational learning opportunities for students (Webster, Lopez, Allnut, Clague, Jones and Bennett 2010; Lea, Cruikshank, Paliadelis, Parmenter, Sanderson and Thornberry 2008). However, many myths surround rural life and few students opt to 'go bush' and experience life in remote parts of Australia (Chenoweth 2004). Further, a number of barriers deter students from engaging in rural and remote practice, including ambivalence, lack of knowledge amongst students about rural life (McAuliffe, Chenoweth and Stehlik 2007) and significant financial disincentives to completing rural and remote clinical placements (Schofield, Keane, Fletcher, Shrestha and Percival 2009; Turner and Lane 2006). Rural students, who typically have a greater commitment to working in a rural or remote community (Smith, Edwards, Courtney and Finlayson 2001; Walker, DeWitt, Pallant and Cunningham 2012), also face extensive barriers to completing tertiary education, resulting from relative rural poverty and rising education and relocation expenses (Bowles and Duncombe 2005).

Encouraging and supporting students to undertake rural or remote placements not only provides significant learning experiences and opportunities for students, but also has the potential for important social justice, equity and inclusion outcomes. As Australian rural and remote communities face economic and social decline (Alston 2005) and resulting high levels of health and social disadvantage (Healy 2004; Ife 2000; AIHW 2008), it is imperative that students are educated about – and prepared and supported to work in – rural Australia. Poor recruitment and retention in rural communities has been connected with, *inter alia*, poor preparation of students to work in this field (McAuliffe, et al. 2007; Gibbs 2002; Lonne and Cheers 2000). Educating students about rural issues and the nature of rural communities is critical for students' professional development and readiness for practice (Chenoweth 2004; McAuliffe, et al.2007) and important for retaining practitioners in these areas of high need (Lonne 2004). Students who undertake a rural or remote placement are exposed to wide-ranging and significant health, economic and social issues, thus enhancing their professional knowledge, ability to work in challenging situations and often their intentions to work in rural or remote areas (Allen 2005; Playford, Larson and Wheatland 2006; Webster et al. 2010; Young, Kent and Walters 2011). There is growing recognition of the need for universities to improve the support afforded students considering and undertaking rural and remote placements (Brown and Green 2009). This support could include increased funding assistance for students in nursing and allied health disciplines (Schofield, Keane, Fletcher, Shrestha and Percival 2009; Turner and Lane 2006) and improved models of supervision, such as the satellite model where a local senior practitioner is employed as the university liaison and support person (Bowles and Duncombe 2005). This enhanced support is important considering the potential rewards to students in experiencing rural life and practice and the benefits of increasing access to skilled practitioners for rural and remote individuals, families and communities.

Considering the need for increased rural and remote student placements, the idea of a website arose out of a 2009 consultation with human service professionals, managers and human resources personnel committed to overcoming the barriers to field education in rural and remote areas. Attendees came from Centrelink, QLD Health, Department of Communities, Early Childhood Australia, Drug ARM, Disability Services, Community Development Services, Australian Institute for Welfare and Community Workers, Centre for Mental Health Learning, the University of Sydney and the Griffith University Work Integrated Learning unit. The aims of the website were to (i) educate students about the economic, social and health issues of rural Australians and (ii) inform students about opportunities to 'go bush' to work both as a student and professional. It is hoped that enhanced knowledge in this area will lead to an increase in the number of students on rural and remote placements as well as qualified professionals seeking work in rural and remote areas. This paper reports on the project design, implementation and evaluation, with the aim of informing future projects focused on rural and remote student placements.

METHOD

Using a modified intervention research approach (Rothman and Thomas, 1994) – which is a practice-based methodology for designing social interventions, educational tools, policies or programs – the project involved the design, implementation and evaluation of an educational website. The strategy comprised of five key phases:

1. Knowledge Development and Utilisation (literature review and ethics approval);

2. Design and Development (interviews, focus groups, practitioner and community consultation, web development support);

3. Implementation and Monitoring (trial and monitoring of the website with undergraduate and postgraduate students in the Griffith University School of Human Services and Social Work);

4. Evaluation (evaluation through qualitative [informal and anecdotal evidence] and quantitative methods [email questionnaires, web-tracking];

5. Reporting and Dissemination (poster presentations, student information sessions, practitioner symposiums, journal article submission).

Overall, the intention was to develop a website, which can be integrated in courses across health disciplines, that maximises student engagement and learning in rural and remote practice. The website, accessible to students on the Griffith University intranet, includes diverse information on:

6. Rural life - including filmed interviews with rural and remote practitioners and students - case studies, articles and a section on de-bunking myths about rural life

7. Placement and professional opportunities in rural and remote communities;

8. Scholarships and support available for rural and remote placements across Australia;

9. Placement planning advice and tips, including cultural sensitivity information;

10. Helpful links;

11. A discussion board and;

12. Site feedback survey.

The site was officially launched in February 2011 at an orientation week function. The launch included a welcome to country from an Indigenous Elder and a Skype presentation with a student on a remote placement. The response from students and staff was overwhelmingly positive.

Data Collection

Data collection involved various methods, including focus groups with undergraduate and postgraduate students in the Griffith University School of Human Services and Social Work and with rural and remote practitioners. These were particularly used in the development phases to elicit suggestions for content and structure of the website. Existing networks and relationships with human service practitioners in rural and remote communities were utilised, and these practitioners engaged in a forum where the idea for the website initially emerged. They were later interviewed for the website, participated in a group meeting regarding the website, and provided feedback to the project team. Students who had completed, or were completing, a rural or remote placement were interviewed as an audiovisual resource for the website and were asked for feedback on their own placement preparation and the types of support that would have been helpful. Additionally, the research assistant and a team member facilitated a focus group with students in a preparation for placement course, using a focus conversation format to record their ideas and suggestions for the site (Stanfield 2000).

Several methods were used in the monitoring and evaluation phases of the project to assist the ongoing development and improvement of the website. These methods included: email questionnaires to students requesting their feedback on the site; recording of formative feedback from staff in meetings and in email communication; collection of site-tracking statistics; feedback gathered from the website's online survey; and collection of rural and remote placement data from the School's placement team in order to compare this with baseline data from the previous five years.

RESULTS

Development phase

In the focused conversation group, facilitated with 27 final year human services and education students, only four students were considering a rural or remote placement, and two of these students were originally from rural or remote regions. Several key themes emerged within the discussions regarding concerns about rural and remote placements, including considerations about: career; personal wellbeing; finances; commitments

(university and family); and environment/location. The group proposed several strategies, including the provision of scholarships and assistance with accommodation, to improve interest in, and access to, rural and remote placements, and these findings were used to inform the website's content areas.

A similar process was applied to the meeting with rural and remote practitioners, in which their experience with field supervision and suggestions for the promotion of rural and remote placements were recorded and utilised in the development of the website. Key themes from this meeting included: challenges of rural and remote practice, such as limited outreach services and referral options, and higher travel requirements and associated costs; the need for early establishment, and ongoing management, of professional and privacy boundaries due to the likelihood of dual relationships in smaller communities; the many similarities of rural and remote practice with regional and metropolitan practice; benefits of rural and remote practice, such as greater diversity of caseloads, increased autonomy, immense opportunities for broad learning and career development, and experiencing a sense of 'professional adventure', fun and social connectedness in rural and remote communities. Practitioners also offered placement planning advice and information, including seeking support with accessing accommodation, financial subsidies and social support networks, and spoke emphatically that the perception of rural life as social isolating is a myth. These findings were incorporated and addressed in the development of the website.

Monitoring and evaluation phases

The collection of more formal evaluation data informed improvements to the website. Six students provided feedback via an email questionnaire. While they generally found the site "easy to navigate and engaging", chief among their suggestions for improvement was the need for more scholarship information to assist them to overcome barriers to rural and remote placements associated with relocation costs and loss of earnings whilst away from home. Students felt that having greater financial support would be the most significant incentive to complete a rural or remote placement, with one student stating: "By having enough funds to support yourself whilst away, rural placement would be a more attractive proposition". In response to this feedback, the scholarships section of the website has been upgraded and now includes information on a range of national and state-based rural clinical placement scholarship schemes. Further, students suggested the site needed to be promoted more as they felt the option of rural and remote placements was largely unknown amongst students. In response, a professionally created post-card style flyer was created to assist the promotion of the site to students and practitioners. It is hoped that by promoting the site to practitioners, they may choose to advertise placement opportunities on the site. A section of the website is now available for this purpose and existing opportunities are posted there.

Site tracking statistics indicate a positive ongoing interest in the site since its launch. Between the launch in February and the end of semester 2 2011, there were 163 visits to the content areas of the website. While most visits were following the launch of the website, visits to the site have continued every month since the launch. Of these, 30 people viewed the discussion board. Consequently, the research team plans to develop this section of the website to reflect the interest in discussion of rural and remote placement and practice and to further engage students in this learning opportunity. An online feedback

survey is available to users, which consists of questions regarding the look and layout of the site, its usefulness and its impact on decision making in relation to rural and remote placements. Unfortunately, the response rate to date has been poor (n=1). This may suggest the provision of an online survey as the sole evaluation method is inadequate in gathering sufficient information on the relevance, impact and user-friendliness of a website.

Using placement data it was discovered that a total of three students undertook a rural or remote placement in 2011, which is an increase from two students over the previous six years. Anecdotally, a number of students have expressed interest in undertaking a future rural or remote placement and have met with their field education convenors regarding necessary arrangements. It is hoped this interest will continue to grow and result in an increase in rural and remote placements in coming years.

DISCUSSION

The project appears to have increased student interest in rural and remote practice and improved understanding of opportunities to 'go bush' for their placement. Through the use of email questionnaires, statistics and anecdotal evidence (informal communication and correspondence within the School), students have provided positive feedback on the website and have indicated increased interest in rural and remote placement and professional opportunities. The website has been embedded in a number of courses and programs across the school; however, there is certainly scope to increase its integration further, ensuring its broader impact and long term sustainability. At the School level, the project has raised awareness of rural and remote health issues and inequalities, as well as the many opportunities to expand one's practice experience by working in these communities. The project team will continue to meet with academics from other Health schools to further disseminate the project findings and encourage its adaptation in their areas of teaching.

There were indeed challenges in the development of the website that others considering developing such a tool should be cognisant of. These were due, in part, to the research team's limited experience in web development and production of audiovisual material. This led to extended timeframes in the completion of some tasks and affected the readiness of the site to go 'live' with fully functional materials. This experience highlights the need for expertise and training.

Good relationships with practitioners in the field in rural and remote areas have been pivotal to developing meaningful and engaging resources for the website. As a result of the project, collaborations have been fostered between academics and practitioners in rural and remote communities. The project team have been working with industry partners in rural and remote areas on a number of projects. As well as being closely involved in the development of the website, through interviews (which appear on the site) and a focus group forum (to be uploaded to the site), rural and remote practitioners have given presentations at the university on rural and remote practice and have disseminated information regarding rural and remote scholarships.

CONCLUSION

This project report provides one example of how to promote rural and remote interest, practice and knowledge amongst university students. Although not systematically evaluated, the data would suggest that an online education tool is beneficial in promoting rural and remote practice, particularly when embedded across a range of programs and courses. Undertaking a placement in a rural area not only has numerous benefits for students, universities and residents, but is important in promoting social inclusion and access to services in rural and remote areas.

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Knowing that and knowing how: Building student confidence through skills assessment

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ABSTRACT

Social Work education in Australia occurs in a tertiary education setting with field placement offering the key opportunity for students to demonstrate and integrate skills and theory outside of specific instances of classroom clinical practice or the use of role plays in classroom settings. There is broad agreement that social work practice includes a complex mix of values, knowledge and skills (Hudson 1997; Australian Association of Social Workers 2003; Trevithick 2008). Teaching across this complex mix can require different instructional approaches for successful acquisition or learning by students (Knight 2001). This paper discusses a recent innovation within a Social Work program at an Australian university where the demonstration of skills formed the basis for a teaching and learning process which addressed all three elements and provided students with opportunities to build their confidence as they move into their field placement. The paper begins with a discussion of the literature on skills within social work. We provide a description of the skills demonstration assessment and report on evaluation data of the assessment. We conclude that the use of a skills demonstration assessment contributes to building student confidence at applying appropriate knowledge, values and skills in advance of undertaking field education.

Keywords: *social work education, direct practice, social work skills teaching and learning*

SKILLS IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

In this paper we describe the implementation of a Skills Demonstration assessment as a means for teaching social work interview skills. The assessment is innovative as it utilises experienced social work practitioners as 'actors' who contribute valuable knowledge and expertise to the assessment of students as they demonstrate their ability to build rapport and engage with a 'client'. The paper reports on the outcomes of four years of evaluation and discusses the innovation in the context of student learning, particularly in the area of skills acquisition for social work practice. Recommendations are made for how this might be implemented cost-effectively within existing programs.

Trevithick (2005) discusses skill as a central feature of competence and as a suite of abilities necessary to the performance of social work intervention processes. Indeed, in order to clarify this relationship, Trevithick went beyond the social work literature and utilised work from Welford (1958, cited in Trevithick 2005), which described skills as having three characteristics. The first is that skills involve performance of activities that are focused on an object or situation; that is, humans perform skills in a purposeful way. Second, skills are learned gradually with repeated practice. Third, skills are performed in **'**an ordered and coordinated temporal sequence or chronological order**'** (Welford 1958, cited in Trevithick 2005 p. 63), which means there is a pattern to how specific skills are performed. For example, in meeting with someone for the first time there is generally a pattern as to how the communication unfolds and this will be shaped by a range of factors including worker skill and setting. In discussing skills Cournouyer (2008) was moved to create his own extensive description of what these might entail:

A social work skill is a circumscribed set of discrete cognitive and behavioural actions that are consistent and congruent with (1) research-based knowledge; (2) social work values, ethics and obligations; (3) the essential facilitative qualities or the 'core conditions'; (4) the characteristics of professionalism; and (5) a legitimate social work purpose within the context of a phase or process of practice (p. 4).

This definition picks up Welford's earlier description of skills as a performance of actions directed in a purposeful way towards a goal and takes it further by placing skilled behaviour in the context of social work practice whereby it should also embody knowledge, values and professionalism.

Skills are also described in the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) Practice Standards (2003) as incorporating a range of knowledge as well as behaviours and abilities. While the AASW Practice Standards helpfully name specific skills sets, such as interpersonal, communication, critical and reflective practice as skills, these are not described in much detail. If we take each skill set in detail it is possible to examine the theoretical knowledge informing its operation within the context of social work practice. Indeed Trevithick, Richards, Ruch and Moss (2004) undertook this task with regard to communication skills in social work and found that overall:

…theoretical coverage tends to be implicit or, if explicit, tends to lack sufficient depth and critical analysis (p. 11).

Moreover, the authors suggest that this may be in part due to the assumption of shared knowledge between members of the same professional community or it may be attributed

to ideas about skills as being a separate domain from knowledge (Trevithick, et al. 2004). The lack of a coherent framework within which skills are taught has contributed to the Social Work profession looking outside disciplinary boundaries and importing ideas from other professional settings. These include but are not limited to frameworks and models from psychology, communication/learning theory, social theory, and relational/cultural perspectives (Trevithick, et al. 2004). These theoretical ideas or models place importance on different aspects resulting in studies or teaching practice that emphasise different components of a particular skill set. This contributes to a lack of clarity within the area of skills instruction across the profession as a whole. Use of knowledge from other disciplines has also meant that Social Work as a profession has invested little time in developing its own knowledge of teaching and learning social work skills specifically.

TEACHING SOCIAL WORK SKILLS

In the context of designing and implementing the Skills Demonstration we discuss here, the absence of an agreed method of instruction was addressed by conceptualising the assessment as aimed at instructing students specifically in interviewing skills. We understand interviewing to be 'a conversation with a deliberate purpose, a purpose mutually accepted by the participants' (Kadushin 1990, p.3). The knowledge base of this skill set was then drawn from social work research and texts specifically Maidment and Egan 2004; Mumm 2006; Chenoweth and McAuliffe 2008; Cournoyer 2008. It was also acknowledged that competency in interviewing relies on developing student capacities in terms of effective communication and their abilities to demonstrate empathy and interpersonal regard. Knowledge informing these aspects of the unit instruction were based in research and studies on communication (Forrester, Kershaw, Moss, and Hughes 2007; Mohan 2008; Oatley 2009) and texts on interpersonal skills (Bolton 1987; Morrison 2007; Thompson 2009).

This knowledge foundation for teaching skills also pointed out the need to provide space within the class for *practise* in using the skills. The key way this was accomplished was through role-play. Undeniably role-play processes in social work education are not new (Hargreaves and Hadlow 1997; Moss 2010). It is acknowledged that interviewing is a core and widely transferable skill in social work practice, and that role-plays are a convenient and frequently used technique in the development of interviewing skills and knowledge (Petracchi and Collins 2008). Role-play is also effective in teaching communication skills more broadly. At the same time, Petracchi and Collins (2008) state that the use of role-plays in social work education literature, although acknowledged, is underdeveloped. Even so, role play is seen as being 'effective as lectures in cognitive mastery and retention, but … more effective in forming attitudes – particularly self-confidence. When used in conjunction with feedback, it is more effective than lecturing in shaping behaviour' (Doelker and Bedics 1987, cited in Petracchi and Collins 2008, pp.224-225). Even though role plays are often resisted by students, they have a good track record in social work education, particularly in regard to developing skills and knowledge in one-to-one practice situations. Thus role-plays became an integral part of the instruction of the class in advance of the actual Skills Demonstration itself.

There are, of course, many different forms of role-play. Three types were utilised within the class as preparation and as part of the Skills Demonstration assessment. Practice of skills was accomplished by peer-to-peer role-plays. Further demonstration of key aspects of the skills of interviewing was undertaken by the lecturer for the purposes of class observation and discussion. Finally in the Skills Demonstration assessment an actor/social worker was utilised which enabled the injection of elements of uncertainty and realism into the scenario. The use of actors is supported by Mooradian (2008) who conducted research into the effectiveness of learning social work family intervention skills by collecting data from students who observed simulated role-plays using trained actors as clients. He found that not only was there strong and consistent support for using role-plays *per se*, but that student observers reported that the use of actors was a better approach than using peer-to-peer role-play simulations. Petracchi and Collins also evaluated the use of paid actors in role plays with social work students, where the actors would play the role of a client that they had been trained to perform. They too found that using actors in social work education to be an extremely valuable addition to the conduct of peer-to-peer role-plays, and that students reported high levels of satisfaction and utility to their overall learning (Petracchi and Collins 2008).

SITUATING THE SKILLS DEMONSTRATION AT THE LEVEL OF CURRICULUM

The Skills Demonstration takes place in the class Social Work Theory and Practice 1 (SWTP1), a prerequisite unit that must be passed before students can proceed to their first Field Placement. It is the first of four theory and practice units that students study in years three and four of the Bachelor of Social Work. The focus of the unit is on micro-level practice skills and theory and the unit is only offered in semester one of the third year. The namesake of the Skills Demonstration is taken from one of the learning outcomes for SWTP1, informed by Bloom's revised taxonomy (Krathwohl, Anderson and Bloom 2001):

- Demonstrate interpersonal and interactive skills in social work practice

In 2008-2009, the entire Social Work curriculum from first to fourth year was subjected to a mapping exercise using Bloom's Revised Taxonomy (Krathwohl, Anderson and Bloom 2001) which is an instructional design framework. We looked at how the curriculum addressed the AASW Practice Standards and used the taxonomy to embed a developmental learning trajectory across the four years. We also examined individual units by asking in what way each unit contributed to the factual, conceptual, procedural and the metacognitive knowledge dimensions outlined by Krathwohl, Anderson and Bloom (2001). This mapping enabled changes in units earlier in the curriculum to focus on conceptual understanding and analysis and this supported the focus in SWTP1 to move to skills acquisition and demonstration of learnt concepts prior to Field Placement. The other benefit from this exercise was that it enabled the Social Work program to build a case for resources to pay the participating practitioners at the casual marking rate for complex marking because the rationale for the assessment came from this application of instructional design across the whole curriculum. Moreover changes in assessment in other units, enabled by the mapping process, made the use of practitioners almost cost neutral to the Faculty overall.

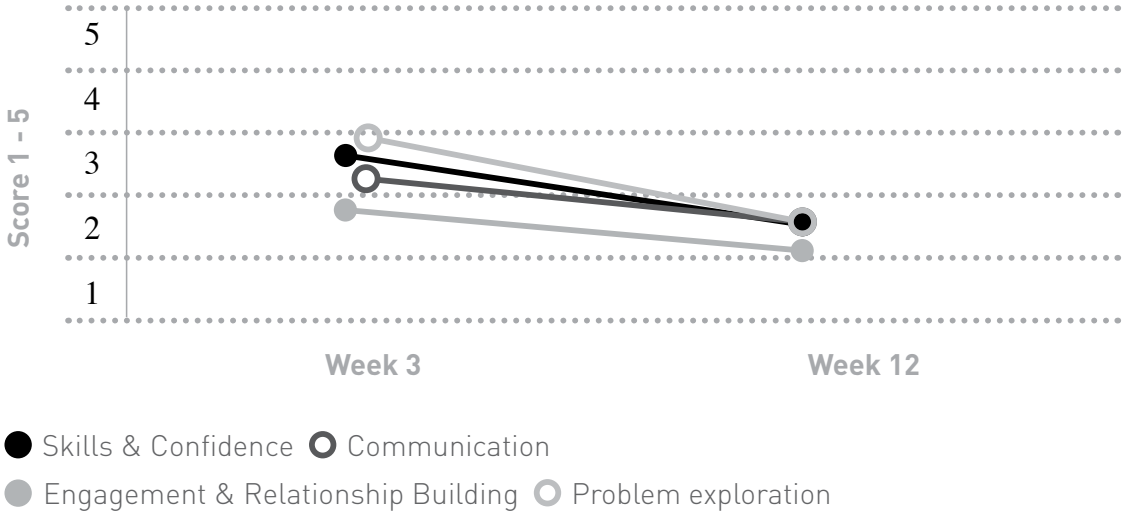
The Skills Demonstration aims to provide an assessment activity from which students are able to *demonstrate in practice* the following broad learning outcomes: an ability to identify the nature and process of professional helping using micro-intervention methods; interpersonal and interactive skills in social work practice; an understanding of the role of professional self; and an ability to practise reflectively. The Skills Demonstration is the centrepiece assessment in this unit and all teaching and learning and other assessment pieces are built around it. These are an essay on ethical and reflective practice (due week 5), the Skills Demonstration (due week 8), and finally, a reflective essay in which the students discuss and reflect on their practice in the Skills Demonstration (due week 13). As mentioned above, the unit is a prerequisite unit for the Field Placement and students must pass the Skills Demonstration in order to pass the unit. Thus, a significant amount of planning is undertaken in order to create a conducive learning environment for skills acquisition (Hargreaves and Hadlow 2007).

PRACTICE LEARNING AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The Skills Demonstration has been evaluated for 4 years. The purpose of the evaluations was to determine the effectiveness of the Skills Demonstration as a tool for learning and skills acquisition. A mixed methods approach (Collins, Leech, Onwuegbuzie and Slate 2009) was utilised within a plan-do-review-improve (PDRI) cycle. PDRI is a local adaptation of the ADRI quality framework of the newly disbanded Australian Universities Quality Agency (AQUA) (Woodhouse 2006). A mixed method approach was utilised to provide a way of incorporating existing University evaluation tools into the analysis in conjunction with specific research methods that draw on student feedback on the Skills Demonstration specifically. Each method yielded particular insights, which were then used to inform changes and development in the Skills Demonstration from one year to the next.

To begin the evaluation process, a focus group (Kayrooz and Trevitt 2005) discussion with all students in SWTP1 in 2008 on their perceptions of their learning needs was undertaken. This was facilitated by the SWTP1 lecturer. We saw it as important for students to have a voice and input into a discussion about their learning needs and what they imagined or hoped that the Skills Demonstration would do for their learning and professional development. The focus group was also used to develop a detailed set of statements, which were used in a pre and post test evaluation of the Skills Assessment in 2008. This comprised 17 statements derived from the week one focus group (e.g. 'I understand how to ask appropriate questions in a one-to-one interview situation'). These were grouped into four categories (skills and confidence, communication, engagement and relationship building, and problem exploration) and ranked by students on a 5 point scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. This method was only used in the first iteration of the Skills Demonstration, really to see if there would be any identifiable improvement in how students ranked their learning and development before, and after completing the Skills Demonstration. As it turns out, there were some noticeable and important benefits to student learning. As the following figure shows, there was uniform and consistent improvement within all thematic categories that were grouped in the pre and post testing evaluation. Hence, a noticeable positive shift in students' perceptions of their practice occurred between weeks three and 12 of the semester (data from assessment evaluation, 2008).

Figure 1: Mean Scores from Question Categories



Key: Strongly Agree (1), Agree (2),
Undecided (3), Disagree (4), Strongly Disagree (5)

More importantly, the focus group enabled the development of particular areas of learning that the Skills Demonstration could focus on. One such example is that students wanted more opportunities to understand, practice, and develop empathy. Another is that students wanted the Skills Demonstration to improve their confidence to practice with situations of uncertainty; to be able to think on their feet and respond professionally and competently with whatever challenges they may encounter in the Skills Demonstration, and by extension, in practice.

In addition, summative evaluation tools about the Skills Demonstration were given to all students at the end of semester from 2008-2011. This approach to evaluation allowed students to give anonymous qualitative feedback on the Skills Assessment (e.g. "What was the best/worst thing about the Skills Assessment?"). Early feedback from students indicated preference for 'standardized clients' (Mooradian 2008 22), meaning that the same client scenario should be played by the same actor for all students. This is important in order to ensure fairness when assessing students and was an approach implemented since 2009.

The methods discussed above yielded a set of data about the Skills Demonstration collected over a 4-year period. A total of 95 students completed the Skills Demonstration between 2008 and 2011. During the same period, students completed and returned 178 evaluations on the unit SWTP1 and the Skills Demonstration. In examining the qualitative data from these evaluations, we identified 130 statements that made direct reference to the Skills Demonstration. We collated all these statements together and subjected them to a thematic analysis. In this sense, we identified and coded the most significant or recurring statements identified in the 130 student comments about the Skills Demonstration and then grouped them into themes. We then examined the relevant literature in light of these themes and discussed the findings in the context of existing bodies of knowledge. We discuss the findings below and conclude with some recommendations and key insights that social work educators may apply to their teaching using role play assessments.

DISCUSSION OF DATA

It was almost universally agreed by students that the Skills Demonstration was an important assessment, with some suggesting that it was the most significant and meaningful assessment they had encountered in two years. In particular, students commented that the assessment was 'authentic' and 'real life' and caused them to critically evaluate and assess their strengths and weakness; it also developed their capacities at reflective practice. Reflective practice is an essential skill in and of itself within social work (Australian Association of Social Workers 2010; Australian Association of Social Workers 2010), with the ability to undertake reflection considered a hallmark of professional practice (Schon 1983). Five themes were identified from qualitative data and these are discussed below.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A SAFE PROCESS

The climate of the class is a crucial element if the use of role-play is to be successful in assisting students to practice and learn skills. Students were very astute in pointing out situations that they felt were unfair or had negatively impacted on their ability to feel safe enough to explore their practice. For example, students pointed out early on that consistency in the assessment process is crucial to building a fair process, and by this they meant that all students should be assessed as interviewing the same 'client/scenario':

The skills demonstration should be the same for everyone....it's not fair when it comes to assessment if [students] have not experienced the same issue at hand, or even the same person (student comment, 2009).

It is very important that in role-play pedagogies a safe learning environment is created and supported by the instructor (Hargreaves and Hadlow 2007). This involves the instructor demonstrating and modelling 'the qualities of empathy, genuineness and congruence' (Hargreaves and Hadlow 2007, p. 64) and a learning context that allows risk-taking and mistakes should be fostered and supported. In SWTP1, several weeks are devoted to developing this context, along with providing many opportunities for students to rehearse and practice with their student colleagues the kinds of skills that they will be expected to demonstrate in the Skills Demonstration. Given that the Skills Demonstration is an assessable item worth 40% of the overall unit assessment, students took this task very seriously and reported in the evaluations that they wanted as much time as possible to practice their skills in the classroom. For example:

More time practicing interviews (student comment, 2010).

More observation of tutor interviewing others and displaying good and bad interview techniques (student comment, 2010).

More mock interviews done in the class (student comment, 2008).

It was not uncommon for students to practice interviewing on their family and friends too. However, this is not an a-theoretical exercise; skills are part of the mix of knowledge and values that constitute social work practice (Trevithick 2008). Students also critically examine and discuss a range of case studies that have practical or ethical problems inherent

in them, and this gives them an opportunity to examine and articulate their practice position in relation to these cases. Overall, this process allows students to test out their thinking and work out what kind of practical response they might undertake as a consequence.

One of the key ways in building a safe process is the importance of conveying upfront to students the intention that this is a learning activity, not a process designed to fail them, or trip them up. In fact, students are advised that, if necessary, they will be given more than one shot at succeeding in this assessment. After all, this is what 'practice' should be about. For one student, this was a particularly powerful point in their learning:

Getting the chance to do it again was excellent, as I was able to reflect twice on different aspects of my learning. Because I got it right the second time what I had messed up the first time – the second time around I was able to focus on other areas we didn't see first time around (student comment, 2008).

There has been the occasional instance where the content on the Skills Demonstration interview has surfaced some issues for some students; in some cases, to such an extent that the student has not been able to complete the exercise. This is not uncommon, and is a feature of social work practice too (Moss 2010). The steps to address this here include canvassing this possibility with students in advance so that they have enough awareness and insight to recognise when they may need to raise this with the instructor and seek assistance. The instructor needs to be prepared to respond appropriately to this by allowing the student to discuss their feelings and if appropriate assist them to access further support (Moss 2010).

FEAR, ANXIETY, EMOTION

Understandably, students view this assessment task with some trepidation. As mentioned above, this can be dealt with and managed by the instructor who seeks to create a safe learning space. When asked what was the worst thing about the Skills Demonstration, students invariably mentioned their anxieties:

The anxiety beforehand regarding what to expect (student comment, 2008).

Sweaty palms, nervous. The leading up to it – we didn't know what to expect, however it felt great after it was finished (student comment, 2008).

The nervousness of being challenged on something differing [sic] to my knowledge

Didn't really feel I had adequate practice for such a scenario, which tended to generate a certain level of anxiety, but in hindsight the process was very useful and great for learning (student comment, 2009).

At the same time, developing skills in understanding and managing emotions is vital to effective social work practice (Morrison 2007). Feelings and emotions about practice should not and cannot be screened out completely or ignored. Incorporating emotional

understanding in regards to students' feelings about practice and the issues that sometimes arise in the context of practice avoids a descent into seeing practice as merely a technical exercise in competency (Morrison 2007). In fact, Morrison (2007) cites research that situates emotional intelligence as significantly important in determining success in work and life, and links its importance to being effective in core social work roles such as engagement, assessment, and empathy. Thus, while it is true that students will often feel a range of powerful emotions before, during, and after the Skills Demonstration, the point is not so much to smooth them over, but to assist students to find ways to deal with stress, anxiety and develop effective coping strategies (Morrison 2007). As Morrison notes, however, this is a neglected area of social work research and scholarship and work is needed here to investigate more thoroughly the teaching of emotional intelligence in social work education.

AUTHENTICITY

A particularly strong theme in the data collected is that students judged the Skills Demonstration to be authentic and 'real life'; although there were some minor reports from some students that they still experienced this as a contrived experience. The authentic nature has a lot to do with how the assessment process is set up and structured. The overall aim is to create as much realism as possible within the constraints of it being undertaken as a classroom exercise. On the day of the interview students wait in a room to prepare to meet their 'client'. When the appointment time arrives, students are invited into a separate room where their 'client' is already waiting. Students do not know anything prior about the 'client'. From the moment the student enters the room, the assessment of their practice begins. The student is required to interview the 'client' for 10 minutes. They need to demonstrate that they can quickly build rapport with the client, ask relevant questions in order to assist the client to explore their situation, demonstrate to the client that they understand what is being communicated to them, work with the client to reach a beginning understanding of the client's situation, demonstrate empathy, and so on. Students are not required to design an intervention or provide advice. Here are some student comments on the realism of the Skills Demonstration:

The fact that the situation was 'real to life' and that the 'client' was not known to me was good (student comment, 2008).

It was real life; not just theory and essays. Got to finally test out what we have been learning for 2 years (student comment, 2008).

[Skills Demonstration] provided practical and theoretical knowledge for social work, and I was able to start placing myself in the role of a social worker (student comment, 2010).

I think that the skills assessment offered a real life example of a client and prepared/helped with assisting understanding (student comment, 2008).

The absence of the details concerning the 'client' adds a level of realism (Hargreaves and Hadlow 1997) to the exercise by ensuring that students do not rehearse their responses

to a stereotype that they have built out of their knowledge of a pre-planned scripted role-play (Hargreaves and Hadlow 1997). Early feedback from students suggested the need to provide some context of their interview, and so students are provided with information on the hypothetical social work service that they are based in. This includes information about the service, their role in the service, the scope of the service and the kind of personal and other problems that clients of the service typically present with. Also provided is information on the socio-economic context of the social work service. This information gives students some sense of how to position themselves and think about their role during the Skills Demonstration. Even though students recognise that the Skills Demonstration is a contrived exercise, the more realism that can be generated the higher the degree of genuine interactions and hence cognitive and affective engagement with the role-play will occur (Mooradian 2008). Lastly, it is important that the scenario is challenging but not impossible to deal with (Hargreaves and Hadlow 2007). This ensures the conditions for making skill acquisition more likely because it balances the right levels of anxiety for learning without overwhelming students cognitive thresholds (Fischer, 1980, cited in King and Kitchener 1994).

Part of achieving a sense of realism really depends on the person chosen to act the role of the client. The person who plays the role of the client must possess a measure of acting skills in order create a degree of realism and authenticity (Mooradian 2008; Petracchi and Collins 2008). 'Actors' must be able to present a client situation in a way that provides plenty of opportunities for students to apply their skills. The actor used for the Skills Demonstration is actually an experienced social work practitioner with good acting abilities. The social worker/actor needs to be able to portray the context and issues that many social work practitioners face in their practice with enough depth and context so as to provide the students with a good range of directions to explore. Each student will approach the interview in a different way, by exploring different aspects of the 'client's' story, or asking different questions. Given that the social worker playing the role brings a wide range of experience from their practice, the role play never hits a dead end or becomes stuck. Third, and importantly, the social work practitioner is able to provide the student with immediate feedback about the impact of the students' practice, including how they experienced the questioning, levels of empathy and communication techniques utilised by the student. Feedback to students is therefore from a dual vantage point: that of the 'client' and that of an experienced social worker. High degrees of realism and the use of appropriate feedback - particularly in allowing students to discuss their practice – are important to the overall success of this teaching method (Mooradian 2008).

PRACTICAL AND 'HANDS ON'

Students are assessed on their interviewing and communication skills, affective listening, paraphrasing, feedback, questioning and their ability to gather relevant information in a sensitive and methodical manner. They are also assessed on their ability to demonstrate empathy and build rapport with the client. Students overwhelmingly judged this exercise as being practical and entailing a 'hands on' approach to learning:

It was good because I was able to use skills that I have learnt throughout the social work course (student comment, 2008).

The Skills Demonstration was very good as it was a practical example of what we were learning (student comment, 2011).

I really enjoyed putting what I had read and learnt into practice in the skills demonstration and the written assessments which provided the freedom to explore areas of the helping profession including theories that are used in the social work profession (student comment, 2010).

It encouraged me to look at my potential skills and highlight areas for improvement (student comment, 2008).

While students tended to report on the merits of the Skills Demonstration in terms of what it meant for their practical skills, at the same time students are assessed on their ability to begin to link a theoretical account to the interview. That is to say, the assessment is not just about their practical demonstration of skills, but their thinking too. At the end of the Skills Demonstration the student is asked to comment on how the interaction went for them - the kinds of things that they did well, or struggled with, or would do differently. This is a form of reflection-on-practice (Schon 1983). In addition, students are asked to offer a tentative assessment of the case in the form of a hypothesis that explained, even in part, what was happening in the case and why (Sheppard, Newstead, Di Caccavo, and Ryan, 2000). In their research Sheppard et al (2000) identify three forms of hypothesis that social workers tend to use to understand case situations: partial, whole, and speculative. While whole hypotheses focus on the entire case, and speculative hypotheses allow for an imagining of future possibilities, most students tended towards a partial hypothesis of the case, focussing on particular and selective aspects of the case. It is interesting to note, however, that the students with a stronger theoretical and reflective bent to their practice tended to offer more of a whole case hypothesis as the explanatory framework for the particulars and phenomena in the case. Given that 'hypothesis generation provides a key element of the reflexive process' (Sheppard 2000, 476), arguably what is important is not just skills per se, but a clear theoretical framework for the conduct of certain skills and a theoretical basis for analysis of problems, behaviour and phenomena. Thus, the teaching and assessment of skills needs to provide for theoretical learning and assessment too.

CONFIDENCE TO PRACTICE

Findings from Skilton's (2010) study showed that authentic role-play teaching approaches improve students' self-confidence. Likewise, our evaluations showed that students consistently reported that the Skills Demonstration improved their confidence to practice. There were two comments in the data set contrary to this view, stating that if the experience went badly for the student it could undermine their confidence. Thus opportunities for follow-up and debriefing with some students should be planned for. Despite this criticism, the major theme was that the Skills Demonstration created an opportunity for students to begin to feel more confident about their practice. For example:

It gave an authentic opportunity to practice our skills, and insight into the areas that may impact on our professional capacity (student comment, 2008).

That despite it being so daunting, it was very relevant. It enabled me to think of myself as competent and allowing skills we had learnt about in theory to be put into practice (student comment, 2008).

Part of this may be due to the fact that these kinds of assessments integrate theory and practice in situated and contextually meaningful ways. This is an issue raised by Moss (2010) about the need to address long-standing criticisms that some students and employers have about academic social work education being unable to fully prepare students for the 'real world' of practice. Mumm (2006) conducted a study to determine the efficacy of various field placement teaching methods and found that discussion of the skills and techniques, modelling and co-counselling between field educator and student were the most effective in teaching skills to students, with process recording and lectures the least effective. It is likely that students' experiences of 'chalk and talk' teaching feed into these perceptions. Thus, part of the purpose of role-play practice and assessment is not only to develop student skills and knowledge, but to ensure that they are prepared before they begin their interactions with clients (Hargreaves and Hadlow 2007). The class in which the Skills Demonstration occurs is timed to take place before students begin their first field placement experience. Skilton's (2010) findings also indicate that after completing realistic role-play activities students tended to conceptualise and think about clients in a different, and more sophisticated light.

These themes clearly demonstrate the unique nature of the Skills Assessment in the way it offers an opportunity in a safe environment for students to increase their confidence through a practical exercise. The key innovation of this assessment lies with use of practitioner expertise not only in creating an authentic role-play scenario but also in the benefits for students in the practitioner being able to give direct feedback to students on how their efforts to engage, build rapport and demonstrate empathy was experienced by the 'client'. This feedback is valuable to the students because it provides a window on their performance from a practice perspective.

CONCLUSION: SOCIAL WORK LEARNING AND PRACTICE COMPETENCE

In conclusion, skills are an important feature of social work competence and as such they require a range of teaching strategies for successful acquisition by students. In this paper we have reported on an innovative assessment that incorporates the experience and knowledge of expert social work practitioners to aid student learning. Evaluations of this assessment from student's perceptions of their learning and development suggest broadly that how they *think* about themselves as practitioners and what they *believe* they have learnt in the classroom strongly influence their sense of competence and efficacy as practitioners. In this sense, the Skills Demonstration can be seen as useful because it did intervene upon and shape the perceptions students hold around their beginning practice.

This Skills Demonstration provided opportunities for students to practice their skills and reflect upon and learn from their experiences. It also allowed opportunities for them 'get it wrong' in a safe space. Such learning is also valuable. It is the case that a component of the learning in this unit is for conceptual understanding, but it is also about confidence in that

understanding, insofar as that understanding can be usefully transferred to a practice situation. That is, an idea like empathy becomes more understood, meaningful, and retained, if it is applied in practice. This is the distinction and relationship between 'knowing that' and 'knowing how' (Ryle 1990). Role play activities and in particular assessments of student practice give students opportunities to practice and experiment with methods of how they might conduct themselves in particular ways and in particular situations.

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"The dishes can wait: a young mother's reflection post-PhD".

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I envy full-time doctoral students, privileged to spend most days on campus, focusing solely on their research project. Completing a PhD is not for the faint-hearted; it is mostly a self-inflicted journey paved with many obstacles. While there is much celebration when the title of 'Doctor' is finally prefixed to one's name, there are limited opportunities to reflect on arduous times and share the realities of student-hood.

What does it actually mean to be a research student in this day and age? I was a PhD candidate from 2006 to 2011 at the Queensland University of Technology, Australia. Asmar (1999, p. 267) succinctly describes how '[t]he PhD degree which is supposed to open up the magic doors to an academic career is not attained without pain'. During those five years, I worked in the multicultural field, got married, established myself as a newly arrived skilled migrant in Australia, and had a baby. Each of those situations presented specific obstacles to ultimately submitting my thesis, and I experienced them concurrently. Some would say I love a challenge.

My PhD was awarded in April 2011. I thoroughly enjoyed conducting ethnographic research on resilienc of single refugee women in Brisbane. As a relatively privileged skilled migrant, I learnt tremendously from the lived experiences of women who defy the odds on a daily basis. At thirty-one, I am now an academic in the same institution where I studied as an undergraduate ten years ago. I am the first former student to be appointed in the school. In a way, I have come 'full circle'. There is now an impetus to publish findings from my research endeavours. This is important, as a lot of hard work has gone towards completing my PhD.

However, I carry multiple and enmeshed identities as a young woman-skilled migrant-new citizen-wife-mother-researcher-lecturer. The research aspect of my PhD was only one piece of the puzzle, influenced by other important facets. Similarly, the complexity of identities experienced in social welfare and caring professions warrants reflecting on the inextricable links between personal experiences and practice frameworks. Reflexivity enriches professional identities and implies the 'careful consideration of the self' (Miehls and Moffatt 2000, p.343). Rather than focussing on mastering skills to control anxiety, social welfare practitioners are now encouraged to embrace discomfort and experience the self subjectively, acknowledging the complexity of identities and practice implications.

I decided to candidly share my experiences, not because I want a pat on the back, but because my life was quite complex and I still managed to complete my PhD. I could not find a lot of literature on the subjective experiences of doctoral students, as existing accounts tend to focus on the research process itself (for example, Salmon 1992; Wolstenholme 2008). The meanings attached to attending university have significantly changed over the years, as the demands of caring for dependents and earning an income while studying commonly constitute the realities of many. Such experiences remain largely unexamined. I am hoping that researchers who may be struggling and happen to stumble across this narrative of my experiences may find comfort in knowing that *it can be done*.

MOTHERHOOD: 'PUBLISH OR PERISH' OR 'POPULATE OR PERISH'?

After World War II, there was an impetus to increase the migrant population to reconstruct and industrialise Australia's economy, as well as a precautionary measure should the country have to defend itself against potential invasions (State Library of Western Australia 2001). Australian academics have adapted this phrase to convey the need to publish widely to ensure career advancement, or else face the bleak prospect of having one's research relegated to the *'oubliettes'* of the institution. As a budding academic, I am often asked if I have published articles. I always respond with a smile that I got 'publish or perish' confused with 'populate or perish'.

Publishing in peer-reviewed journals or writing a book is the *sine qua non* of migrating to academia-land. Yet, this pathway is fraught with difficulties, particularly for women. Asmar (1999, p. 256) explored the obstacles hindering academics' swift career progression in diverse contexts and identified the 'biological imperatives of women's childbearing and childcaring functions' as a traditional barrier. The struggle to keep up with research publications while managing a teaching load yielded feelings of guilt as quality time with

children was forgone. Taking 'time out' from research careers to have children, and post-thesis submission exhaustion, could delay women's progress. There were clear personal costs associated with being a 'successful' woman with children in academia (Asmar 1999).

At various stages of my candidature, I included the phrase 'Write draft journal article' on my list of aims for the year. I never got to it. It was simply too demanding while juggling work responsibilities with study aspirations. As a new house-owner, earning an income was compulsory, so it was essential that I worked while studying. Weekends and public holidays were a time of productivity. I naively believed that when I got to the writing stage of my PhD, I would have more 'flexibility' with my time for publications. After two years in a part-time study mode, I was awarded a scholarship, which enabled me to study full time from 2008 onwards while keeping a part-time work arrangement.

In the scholarship guidelines, there was a clause about an allowance for three months paid maternity leave. My initial reaction was a sense of pride. I lived in a country that acknowledged gender among its pool of PhD students, including women who have babies! An inevitable question popped into my mind: was I among the women who wanted a baby? I had never given this possibility any serious thought. I was in a committed relationship, a happy dog owner, and a devoted PhD student with travelling plans for many years to come. To my (and my partner's) surprise, the answer to the baby question was yes. Within a year of this moment of self-revelation, I became pregnant.

I apprehended sharing the news with my supervisors. I was blessed with understanding and supportive mentors, and on that occasion too, their positive reactions showed that they both believed in my potential to juggle thesis writing with motherhood. Both academics had supervised another young woman who had two children during her candidature, and was awarded her PhD with flying colours. I turned to this fellow woman for advice and survival tips, as she was the living example of what can be achieved with good time management skills and a strong support network.

I could tick the box for good time management skills. I had it all planned out over the next few months: I would write relentlessly before the baby's arrival, ready to jump back into PhD-mode after my maternity leave lapsed. However, being a new Australian resident with no family members nearby meant that my partner and I would be alone in caring for our baby. This situation represented an additional difficulty for me as the primary-carer-aspiring-doctor. I was hoping I would uncover some outstanding juggling abilities even though I knew maternity leave did not exactly mean 'spare' time for studying.

Ryan (2007) highlights the knowledge gaps on the social worlds of migrant mothers with young children in diverse circumstances. Migrant women's sense of agency in transnational settings has been largely ignored until recently because women were simply seen as men's passive companions (Pessar and Mahler 2003) or in domestic roles (Ryan 2007). However, migrant women's lived experiences abound with adaptational characteristics in responses to daily challenges, which would be absent if migration had not taken place (Pessar and Mahler 2003). There is therefore a significant 'habitus' of migration embedded in women's

everyday lives (Marshall and Foster 2002). Nevertheless, tensions arising from changes in social networks as well as the inextricable links between migration and women's identities are inevitable (Marshall and Foster 2002).

I stopped anticipating what would happen post-pregnancy. All I could do was cross fingers for a 'good' baby. What I had not expected was how unwell I felt during pregnancy, which meant I could not focus on writing. I was producing mediocre drafts despite great research findings, knowing fully well that my writing was sub-standard. My supervisors and I agreed that I should take a period of leave earlier than foreseen.

MY DAUGHTER'S ARRIVAL: AUGUST 2009

Nothing could prepare me for the transition to motherhood. As a young woman who was used to being 'in control' and anticipated change and difficulties, the arrival of my daughter quickly reminded me that there was no user manual or flow-chart diagram on how to be a mother. All areas of my life converged towards the sole purpose of taking care of a newborn during those first few weeks. Books and websites helped, advice and gifts were welcome, but at the end of the day, it was difficult to be at home with a baby. The mundane tasks of this novel life came in sharp contrast with the fast-paced, challenging and stimulating environment I was used to. Some days, I did not know if I was being a neurotic or neglectful mother in this unchartered territory. I was learning what it meant to be in the 'ambiguous position of mothering' (Ryan 2007, p. 303).

Straight after my daughter's grand arrival, I promised myself that I had wasted enough time and energy on the vain pursuit of a higher research degree. After a couple of months spent at home though, I asked my supervisors to meet via *Skype* to plan how I would transition back into study mode as I wanted to finish my PhD. I had perfectly good reasons to interrupt my studies for a longer period of time. Everybody would have understood and supported my decision. However, I had worked very hard to get this far and I thought it would be foolish to give up so close to the finishing line. More importantly, when I thought about the breadth and richness of information my participants had shared with me, I owed it to these single women to finish writing about their lived experiences, and disseminate new findings on resilience from refugee perspectives. In my privileged position as an articulate skilled migrant and researcher, I was committed to conveying participants' voices in the public domain, and decided I should persevere.

And I had an understanding baby. She hardly cried at all, except when hungry. She slept well at night and enjoyed napping in the daytime. She was independent early on and self-soothed when I could not respond to her little whimpers. My PhD essentials (laptop, books, journal articles, highlighters, post-it notes, cup of tea) moved around the house as she grew up. When she was still a baby, she was happy to lie down on her colourful mat and play with toys in my small study. She was the best research assistant I could ask for. Once she started crawling, we both moved to the living room so I could keep an eye on her bold explorations of the furniture and examination of odd specks of dust on the floor. When she started walking, I changed the times at which I studied, waking up at dawn before her to write (luckily my brain functions best at that time), and reading during her daytime naps.

It all worked out somehow. I progressed, refreshed from my maternity leave 'break'. I did not let myself be discouraged by bouts of guilt that characterise most new parents' experiences. On certain days, it was impossible to put studying on the agenda at all, as my baby required full attention. Meanwhile, she was getting more interesting each day, unwittingly providing some much-needed home-based distraction from my studies. She reminded me to smile each day – she still does. The knowledge that I only had limited time to focus on my thesis motivated me to make each minute count. I hit the ground running each time I had a window of opportunity. I managed to write my entire thesis from home.

THE WORK – (NO) LIFE BALANCE

Amidst all this, there was hardly any time for going to the movies or socialising. Being a PhD student can be all consuming and isolating. It is a real conversation stopper. It is hard to come across people who share similar interests or who are genuinely interested in discussing PhD-related topics. I can count on one hand the friends who supported me along the way and understood why I often had to decline socialising with them. Commiserating with other research students was also rare because I hardly spent any time on campus. At times, my expectations on my partner for support were unrealistic. I went through periods of self-absorption and introversion, resenting anything that would distract me from writing.

House management tasks were relegated to the background. My motto was that if it was not an occupational health and safety hazard for my daughter, it could wait. Time was my enemy when it came to cleaning. The dishes could pile up in the sink. The laundry stayed on the line for a few days, rain, hail or shine. The garden took care of itself and became unsalvageable. The vacuum cleaner was missing in action. Amidst the demands of motherhood, study and work, it became a matter of choosing which house chore could wait another day.

A change in our personal circumstances meant that I went back to work earlier than anticipated, initially for two days a week. For many mothers, paid work is associated with reclaiming a valued sense of identity in the public domain (Ryan 2007), and I was no exception. A lecturing position was advertised at Griffith University. While I had not fully considered academia at that stage, I thought, 'Why not?'. I applied for the position and was successful. I was back into full time work just before my daughter turned one, while she was happily adjusting to her childcare routine.

With a baby in childcare, we became regulars at the local medical practice. Not only was it hard to take care of a sick baby, but I also did so while being sick myself. I still managed to squeeze in a couple of hours' study here and there. Being unwell was not a valid reason for taking time off from writing or working. It was tiring. There was no time to rest from being a mother or a researcher.

Things were hectic. I did not always cope. There is only so much one can bend without breaking. I reached a point in 2010 where I could not see the light at the end of the PhD tunnel. I doubted my abilities as a mother, I was anxious about my new job as an academic,

and life's inevitable roller coaster of emotions was taking its toll on my relationship. The ongoing race against time to finish my PhD and the constantly shifting demands of parenthood had compromised my wellbeing. It was high time to slow down.

I prepared for the final milestones of my PhD candidature. I presented my findings during a seminar to a panel of academics where I defended my thesis. I polished my draft based on the panel's feedback. I was in disbelief when I submitted my thesis for examination in October 2010. In fact, it was such an uneventful day that it was almost disappointing. I was still up in the early morning, feeling 'bizarre' that I was not writing. It was all a bit surreal. Re-channelling my drive to write towards other activities was a challenge in itself – but not one I complained about.

When my partner and I got married overseas in December 2010, it was not only a celebration of our commitment, but the acknowledgement that we had overcome tough times with a PhD comfortably rooted in our house, a wonderful baby, and the ongoing struggle to make connections as recent migrants in a foreign land. The event was also a reminder of important aspects of life. While being awarded a PhD is a significant milestone, love and family are quintessential elements of a balanced life.

It was with a lot of pride that I received the call from my supervisor advising that my PhD was finalised. He acknowledged my own resilience in the process of finding out about fellow women's resilience. My supervisors both experienced the highs and lows of this roller coaster ride with me over the years. Their support was unwavering. Good supervision is an essential ingredient of a successful PhD.

Nobody trips over mountains. It is the small pebble that causes you to stumble. Pass all the pebbles in your path and you will find you have crossed the mountain (Anonymous).

I am now enjoying writing for publication while teaching. The stress levels I may experience these days do not quite compare with that of the PhD era. The accentuated difficulties of juggling motherhood with work and other commitments still take me by surprise at times. I draw on the intensive period of my life as a PhD student to manage those tensions in everyday life. I often get puzzled looks as people try to make sense of the fact that I had a baby while studying towards my PhD. I am glad that I am not studying anymore, and I enjoy more stress-free and meaningful moments with my husband and daughter. But if I had to do it all over again, I would. It took me a long time to realise that I was in fact the privileged one. There are not many contexts where one can be a young woman-skilled migrant-new citizen-wife-mother-researcher-lecturer.

I learnt tremendously from these rich, concurrent experiences. The pursuit of a worthwhile goal means perseverance and sacrifices, and never losing sight of the bigger picture. It also entails recognising the achievements along the way, however small they may seem. Life has opened many doors for me, and I embrace these opportunities fully.

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Rural direct practice student placements: Lessons from adult learning theory

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ABSTRACT

An exploratory qualitative study of successful professional field education direct practice placements for social work students was conducted in rural Australia, in response to identified organisational reluctance to take students on placement. This paper explores the adult education and learning component of the placements and demonstrates the commitment of supervisors and agencies to quality educational experiences for social work students. The paper reports findings covering seven main areas: a commitment to supervision and professional development; the importance of theory; preparation for placement; understanding student learning; the value of placements; measuring success; and the role of the university. The findings suggest that if practitioners are encouraged and/or mentored to take students for direct practice placements, and to engage in the educational practices outlined here, there may be less apprehension by organisations about agreeing to take students on placement. More confident supervisors, and more graduates with practice experience in rural areas, may also help to address the perennial challenge of recruiting and retaining qualified social workers in rural regions.

Acknowledgements: *We thank the members of the reference group for their advice and guidance during the project, as well as those field educators who participated in the study.*

INTRODUCTION

Difficulties in recruiting and retaining health and welfare professionals, and the lack of a critical mass of these professionals in rural and remote areas of Australia to support activities such as field education programs, have plagued regional and rural Australia for years (for example Lonne and Cheers, 2004). Statistical indicators reveal a clear need for counsellors and other health and welfare workers in rural and regional areas. People living in rural and remote areas die younger and experience higher levels of illness and disease risk factors than their counterparts in major cities (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2008a, p. 62). On average, Australians living in rural and remote areas "… are disadvantaged with regard to educational and employment opportunities, incomes, access to goods and services and in some areas, to basic necessities …" (Australian Institute Health & Welfare, 2008b, p. 1).

This exploratory study arose from work by members of the Upper Hume Primary Care Partnership (UHPCP) Rural Counselling Working Group who initiated a forum to examine strategies to enhance direct practice placements in rural and regional areas in response to difficulties in recruiting and retaining counselling practitioners. The group was concerned that regionally-based organisations were becoming increasingly hesitant to offer direct practice placements for social work and social welfare students. Fears expressed by workers in agencies reflected findings in the literature, including constraints experienced by agencies in the economic rationalist climate to use resources more efficiently, affecting the availability of skilled staff for student supervision; concern about risk to clients; a preference for more capable students and less capacity to accept students facing challenges (Bocage, Homonoff and Riley, 1995). The growing shortage of placement opportunities is not limited to regional and rural areas, and has been linked to pressures on organisations to be more efficient, outcome-focused and accountable for use of time and resources (Barton, Bell and Bowles, 2005), as well as increased competition for placements due to the growing number of education providers and students. The UHPCP group wanted to explore ways to facilitate student direct practice placements in the region. A placement student (Mason 2006) undertook a comprehensive literature review around these concerns. Discussion with the group and findings of the review formed the basis for the current research project. A reference group comprising members of the UHPCP and local field education academics, with experience in liaising with student placements in the region, guided the ensuing project. The research team comprised academics from three regional universities in New South Wales and Victoria.

Supported by funding from an AASWWE grant, the study began in 2008. It aimed to examine what strategies and processes organisations use when they host successful direct practice placements in regional and rural Australia. A definition of direct practice, for the purposes of the study, was adopted by the researchers as a term used to denote "work with individuals, couples, families and groups" (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, Strom-Gottfried and Larsen, 2010, p. 25). The term "clinical practice" is sometimes used synonymously with direct practice, but often this is associated with therapeutic counselling approaches

that might exclude the generalist work that human service workers undertake with individuals, families and groups. The environments where placements in this study took place included some where such clinical work was undertaken, but the general term "direct practice" is a more appropriate way to describe the variety of learning settings encountered by students in the study.

The AASW Practice Standards (AASW, 2003) define direct practice in similarly broad terms. Direct practice is the first standard to be addressed in the AASW document and "concerns every aspect of direct social work" (AASW, 2003, p. 7). Direct practice has a focus on methods of intervention; a suite of skills including communication, reflective thinking, negotiation and mediation; and conducting and following through on assessment of client need.

A central focus of the inquiry was whether a "learning organisation" culture was important in supporting good placements. This emphasis was based on a belief that "helping professionals are best able to facilitate others to learn if they are supported in constantly learning and developing themselves" (Hawkins and Shohet, 2002, p. 176). According to Senge (1990, p. 3), learning organisations are:

... organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.

Senge (1990) outlined five features of learning organisations: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision and team learning. Learning organisations engage in individual and collective change, in order to improve the performance of the organisation. Managing the culture of the organisation is an important step in becoming a learning organisation. Attention to cultural values includes a focus on celebrating success, encouraging innovation, believing in the potential of people and being outward looking (Davies and Nutley, 2000). An organisation with a commitment to these cultural values should provide rich and nurturing environments for students.

This paper examines one part of the study. It reports on how adult learning theory is reflected in the practices of a small group of organisations that host good direct practice placements in regional areas. A full report of the results of the whole study will be made elsewhere.

ADULT LEARNING THEORY

In the 83 years since Thorndike, Bregman, Tilton, and Woodyard published *Adult Learning: Studies in Adult Education* (1928), researchers and educators have endeavoured to articulate the ways adults learn and develop relevant strategies for effective teaching. The term andragogy has a longer heritage, and is attributed to Alexander Kapp in 1833. Andragogy now comprises knowledge about how adults learn and strategies for engaging adults in learning experiences. Key writers have examined cognitive and information processing in adults, personality factors, behavioural approaches, experiential learning and

constructivism, group-based learning, self-directed learning, peer tutoring, mentoring, work-place based learning, learning for life, life-long learning, problem-based, on-line, vocational, culturally sensitive and feminist learning frameworks (Boud, & Garrick, 1999; Foley, 2004; Gagne, 1985; Knowles 1973; Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 1998; Kolb, 1981; Lovell, 1982 and Stenhouse, 1983). Specific techniques like the use of learning contracts (Knowles, 1986; Anderson, Boud, & Sampson, 1996), reflective learning (Schön, 1983) and key ideas like learning styles (Kolb & Fry, 1975, Kolb Osland & Rubin 1995) are embedded in adult educational practice today.

Social work and welfare educators and practitioners have been exposed to this material. Teaching tools influenced by adult learning theory, such as learning plans and agreements, supervision contracts, process recording, case study presentation and observation frameworks, have been adopted and enhanced by field educators (Cleak and Wilson, 2004). Universities and other providers of social work and welfare education have taken an active role in the provision of continuing professional development for field educators, using adult learning concepts. A recent example includes the online student supervision project undertaken by a consortium of higher education providers, where field educators can access resources to upgrade their knowledge and skill in order to better support students on placement (Agllias, Bowles, Cassano, Collingridge, Dawood, Irwin, Maywald, McKinnon, Noble, O'Sullivan, Wexler and Zubrzycki, 2010). This resource includes material on adult learning theory, including reflection exercises for supervisors preparing for students.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in two phases. During 2008 a desk audit of nine files of successful direct practice placements was undertaken, to determine if themes could be identified for further follow-up with agencies. The desk audit became a pilot study for the second phase of interviews, identifying directions for later questioning. Criteria for a "successful" clinical placement included agreement by all parties (student, field educator/s and academic liaison staff) that significant learning and/or change for the student had occurred, and that appropriate outcomes had been achieved, as set out in the AASW Practice Standards (2003). According to the AASW, students are expected to progress against the practice standard to reach a level where they are able to "demonstrate the ability to practise to this standard at new graduate level" (AASW, 2010, p. 47). Different outcomes are applied depending on whether the placement is a first (novice) or final (graduating) placement. In terms of the direct practice standard, the objectives to be met are that "the needs of clients are met; their potential is developed; and their control over their lives is fostered; this being achieved through mutual engagement and the application of the social worker's knowledge and skills" (AASW, 2003, p. 6).

Seven of the nine "successful" files were second (final) placements. The practice settings included: community mental health, corrections, community health (2), child protection, hospital social work (2), family support and income support. This is a small sample but for explorative qualitative analysis it is seen to be information rich, highlighting shared areas of action and concern and opportunities for future research and development.

All documents in the files, including reports by students, field educators and liaison visitors were read for common themes. Several themes emerged which guided the development of a set of questions for interviews. The questions were pilot tested and then administered in 2009 to seven field educators who had been involved in successful direct practice placements in regional, rural or remote areas. The interviews were taped and transcribed by the interviewer to ensure accuracy of the data. All the responses were copied and transferred to an Excel spread sheet with one worksheet for each question and with each respondent's statements listed in order. In this way all answers from all respondents to one question were visible on each worksheet. Researchers made every effort to represent all responses in the findings. The findings demonstrate the diversity of practice in rural and remote professional direct practice placements.

The supervisors' experience ranged from 2.5 years to over 35 years. The average was just over 10 years (11.21) and the mode was 14 years. Every supervisor surveyed had students doing direct casework and either had a majority of these students, as distinct from project placements, or offered mixed placements comprising both casework and projects.

The findings of the study are grouped into broad themes below. Participant interviews, as expected in qualitative research, covered a diverse range of content about their education practice. Imposing categories on the data risks obscuring the diversity and multi-dimensional nature of the work the participants reported. The findings, therefore, are loosely clustered around broad headings, understanding that there may be ambiguity and contradictions (Denscombe, 1998, p. 221). The themes are: a commitment to supervision and professional development; the importance of theory; preparation for placement; understanding student learning; the value of placements; measuring success; and the role of the university.

COMMITMENT TO SUPERVISION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Professional field education is situated in agencies where professional practice occurs. The commitment of the agency itself to supervision and professional development of staff members assists adult students to learn. Students observe the agency and practitioners demonstrate that supervision and professional development are relevant to competent professional practice. The relevance of learning to the adult's job or personal life is a key adult learning principle (Knowles, 1984). Incorporating professional development into the working week underscores its importance for workers and students, as an example from a participant demonstrates:

(The) agency has policy and practice days 4-6 times per annum; the staff group looks at the policy manual and works on a topic. This includes attention to Vocational Training. The most recent day looked at ending the counselling relationship. These learning occasions are akin to group supervision. They contribute to the agency being a learning organisation - based on flexibility. Agency and staff need to be highly organised in order to be committed to this type of group learning. A team calendar is organised early each year and builds in in-house training as well. Thursday is team day (Participant 1).

Relevance is reinforced by connecting actual practice experiences to learning through direct supervision, as this contribution suggests:

In formal supervision I tend to keep it fairly formal. I like having a lot of education in there. I ask that they bring a case along to each session for examination and we can discuss knowledge and theory that applies (Participant 3).

In some agencies the student does the task of counselling while the supervisor looks on and gives immediate feedback. This echoes Kolb (1981, p.21-22) where he supports the use of "here and now experience" to test ideas and the use of feedback to change practices and theory, as demonstrated in this example:

Live supervision is applied to phone and face-to-face counselling. The student joins allocated counselling and then takes it on under live supervision then on her own (Participant 1).

Formal supervision is often negotiated and a formal contract is written. This involves the adult student in the planning of the learning process, engages them in keeping supervision relevant and on track and secures a climate of learning (Knowles 1984) where there are clear boundaries around the supervision relationship (Jarvis, 1995, p.6). One supervisor explained:

Good supervision is about having a relationship where students feel comfortable and that they can ask silly questions and not feel stupid. There are boundaries about how we manage personal stuff – how do we manage if we stray into personal stuff? (Participant 3)

Most supervisors mentioned the value of informal supervision in cars *en route* to appointments and meetings, and that they had an open-door policy. The clear message again was direct relevance to the student and immediacy of the learning. Some agencies use office structure to assist in the promotion of opportunities for informal supervision, as one supervisor reported:

Informal supervision: as we're all in here where all the social workers sit and work together it happens all the time (Participant 3).

And another reported how students are included in daily agency activity:

Also we need to fit them in so they sit in with their team; not in a student office (which there is no room for anyway) or as a student group (Participant 2).

Supervisors' contributions about the focus of supervision demonstrated that they applied Knowles' andragogical assumptions - that students move from dependency to self-directedness; they draw on their reservoir of experience for learning; they are ready to learn when they assume new roles; and want to solve problems and apply new knowledge (Knowles, 1970). Supervisors demonstrate a learner-focused approach (Knowles, 1973).

THE IMPORTANCE OF THEORY

Theory is central to supervision of students for all the practitioners. The agency may have an explicit commitment to a particular theoretical framework and this is covered early in the student's orientation and reinforced throughout. Other supervisors have theory texts they use in supervision and ask the student to use as a reference. The use of theory grounds the learner's experience in the "why" of practice (Knowles 1984). Supervisors link theory to here-and –now practice that is immediately relevant. They link theory to experiences and reflections reported by the student – the process is student-led. One supervisor said:

I get them to write down ethical challenges or questions that arise in between supervision sessions and then that's discussed too. They might do some research about that issue and some reading – follow it up a bit. It helps them to learn and to remember (Participant 3).

Another reported:

We talk about texts and authors they like so we can talk about those (Participant 4).

Further comments demonstrate the application of the agency's underpinning theoretical model not only to practice but also in supervision of the student. As one supervisor stated:

The agency works from a strengths approach so the philosophy, skills etc are used as standard across the agency. What's used in supervision is also used in practice (Participant 2).

Applying the agency's strengths approach to her approach with students, another participant said:

We look at ways to improve their practice; and things that they do well (Participant 3).

These comments reflect the way that the supervisors model as well as strengthen the student's capacity to effectively apply theory to the challenges of practice. This demonstrates teaching through Active Experimentation.

All supervisors had contributions to make about theory and its relevance. Three said that it was vital. Several mentioned that it connected the "why" with the "how" and that theory had to be embedded in the doing and not seen as a separate activity. In some agencies it is part of the agency culture and therefore is integrated with the values and attitudes of the staff members. Some supervisors believed that discussions on theory are essential for effective interventions and for the successful transfer of the culture and knowledge base of the profession to future practitioners. They noted that students who could articulate the theory underpinning their practice were confident. As one supervisor said:

Students can see and learn skills but they need a theoretical base. Otherwise the skill becomes the practice rather than the tool for the practice. Reflection is an integral part of our agency. With 361 workers it may be done differently in some places. The action doesn't lead to the outcome. What's more important than the outcome is why you chose that action (Participant 2).

Another participant reported how she facilitates the student's thinking about putting theory into practice:

There is knowledge that tells you that's the way something should be done. We need to ask 'why did you do that?' or 'that way'. The response we want to hear is like 'because I know this from this theory or that'. It also shows the student how much knowledge they have which can lead to increased confidence (Participant 3).

One participant saw a connection between having a solid theoretical framework and the student's capacity for effective decision-making in practice:

Critical decision-making is a vital tool. This needs to happen within a theoretical framework (Participant 2).

The strategies supervisors used to enhance the integration of theory and practice include: critical questioning of the student ("Good work. Can you tell me why you used that skill or technique and not something else?"); the use of journals; reflective exercises; watching the supervisor work and then unpacking the theory afterwards; critically unpacking case notes; and requiring literature searches on relevant topics. In many of these strategies, it is essential for the supervisor to be open to questions from the student about the supervisor's own ways of working.

PREPARATION FOR PLACEMENT

Supervisors were strongly committed to preparing themselves (and their organisations) for having students and focusing on placement as an educational activity – not work experience (Baird, 1999). They review materials from the university, prepare orientation and early learning activities, plan for the placement, ensure the agency can accommodate the student(s) and encourage other staff members who have not had students to consider being involved. One supervisor described how she maintains her readiness for students:

I did the course with [University] about supervision for students and that has been useful. I always go through that again before I say yes to a student to reinforce what I already know. I want students to always have a positive placement (Participant 7).

Another participant reported how she prepares for students coming to undertake direct practice:

Taking the time to think about the clients that would be most amenable and suited to the student and their learning and being able to allocate them some appropriate clients (Participant 5).

Encouraging and supporting other staff members taking students was an important role for this participant:

They don't need to be the best supervisors themselves, but they need to be getting good supervision themselves (Participant 2).

In these comments the supervisors confirm that they see their role with students as a serious professional responsibility.

Supervisors agreed that agency commitment to having students and infrastructure support was essential. Finding space for students, for example, can be a challenge, as this remark suggests:

This is hard – to physically fit them in. We have a space and computer shortage. Need a lot of preparation for the student: physical space, system. Need to be committed to the time it will take (Participant 2).

An organisational culture that is welcoming for students is also important:

One of the other things is that the people I work with are basically pretty helpful and used to students. Allied health numbers are down and falling unfortunately I must say. But the nurses are happy to have students observing and participating at times in what they're doing. The atmosphere is quite amenable and friendly. It's important because if I'm busy or the things I have to do are unsuitable - or they're sick of me and I'm sick of them - there's always someone else for them to have a chat to (Participant 5).

In these comments supervisors confirm their understanding of the student entering a workplace culture as well as a learning environment, and needing support to do so.

UNDERSTANDING STUDENT LEARNING

The findings included examples of the participants working with different stages of the adult learning cycle. For example, this participant demonstrates starting with the student's concrete experience to begin the learning conversation:

The focus is on practice not the service user. For example, what did you bring into the room? What was going on for you then? What were you using? How comfortable were you? (Participant 1)

Another supervisor demonstrates beginning with reflective observation:

I'm big on self-learning, and using adult learning models. We talk about ethics and all that that means and respect for the person as well. They have to be willing to empathise and hear what the customer has to say (Participant 6).

Another participant demonstrates different ways of engaging in abstract conceptualisation with the student that are consistent with their development. This comment not only integrates theory with practice but also the professional self:

It, the balance, changes depending on where the student is at, for example a 3rd year will be looking at the integration of theory and practice, and a final year to get them to articulate their own knowledge of theory and practice (Participant 4).

Another supervisor described how she prepares the student for work with service users by engaging the student in self-reflection:

You know when students are ready by asking them: How will you prepare; look at the assessment; what might you address; what will you use? Then we arrive at the 'let's go' moment – the supervisor may need to be assertive! By mid placement meeting the student should be up and running (Participant 1).

Supervisors used a variety of tools and techniques to help students learn. Supervision contracts, for example, may include: a learning style check, essential documents or books to read and discuss, informal supervision agreement for the initial period, timing and frequency of formal supervision and how a journal will be kept and used in supervision. One supervisor supported the use of student journals on placement in an agency where it was a tool used commonly across the organisation:

A journal is encouraged. It's good for the supervisor to model journaling. I don't read it unless the student wants me to. It is a tool used throughout the agency (Participant 1).

If students are not comfortable keeping a journal, other technologies can achieve the same result, as this supervisor reports:

I had one person who didn't want to. That was fine. Believe it or not, they did an ongoing videotape. They were comfortable and it worked and allowed them to prove to the university what they'd done. So if you get a Gen Y person who doesn't want to write, get a camcorder! (Participant 4)

Supervision tools used in practice in organisations can be adapted for student learning as well, as this example illustrates:

We use the 5-column approach [to supervision] across the agency. It's pretty basic. The columns are things like: the issue, what would be the ideal response, strengths and resources, what's happening, constraints, plan of action. This can be varied as required – even the number of headings and the headings themselves (Participant 2).

The supervisor's deliberate engagement with the student in the learning process through reflection and the application of theory ensures that the placement experience is not one of *non-learning*. For Jarvis (1987 & 1995) *non-learning* can be a result of an adult's interaction with the world through *presumption* - that is they interact through patterned behaviours, and *non-consideration* - that is, they do not respond to a potential learning opportunity. The process of actively engaging the student in reflection moves them from having experiences they do not really think about and skim across. Reflection requires them to look critically on behaviours that they have performed routinely or information they recall by rote. It challenges their comfort, requires them to search for new and more relevant information and transforms their perspective (Mezirow 1991).

The process of reflection involves contemplation and this takes time. The student through supervision is given permission and encouragement to take that time and make

the connections. The student then has the capacity to develop reflection on and in action (Schön 1983). It is this process that turns the experience into pragmatic learning – the experience is not learning *per se*. The educative process implemented by the supervisors is what makes the difference. Supervisors in our study used their knowledge of adult learning to enhance the student experience. One observed:

Most important for good clinical supervision is an interested student and with a little more organisation and forward planning you can provide the student with a realistic learning environment (Participant 5).

Another participant pointed to the importance of understanding learning styles early in the placement in order to plan for the most appropriate supervision model:

When I interview the prospective students I look at their learning styles. Are they the same or different to mine? If they're different it means we can deal with those issues early rather than later in the placement. We get the supervision worked out: lots of indirect supervision, lots of questions, lots of instructions. You have to worry when a student doesn't ask any questions. They can't ask too many! Then I give them a time each week for supervision. I have a format that seems to work that I follow with them: what have they done; what have they learnt; what would they like to learn; what are they reflecting on; what does it mean in terms of theory and practice. These sessions of formal supervision last at least an hour, in a private room where there are no distractions and it's confidential (Participant 7).

Supervisors focus on the practice, its process and the underpinning principles guiding the student. They are less focused on the service user and more on the student. In this way they respond to Mezirow's (1991) concept of perspective transformation that occurs through the active learning process for adults and to Boud, Keogh and Walker's (1985) challenge to turn experience into learning through effective reflection. They enable social work and social welfare students who are having difficulty moving from action (Concrete Experience) and learning through observation (Reflective Observation) to be able to identify the underpinning principles of practice (Abstract Conceptualisation). This process strengthens the student's ability to link experience to theory so that they can move around the adult learning cycle, competently problem solve and develop new behaviours and skills (Active Experimentation). Supervisors are applying the ideas of Kolb & Fry (1975), and Kolb, Osland and Rubin (1995), even if they are not aware of this.

VALUE OF PLACEMENTS

The supervisors interviewed were clear on the message they wished to send to potential supervisors of direct practice placements in social work and social welfare. Advice to potential supervisors included this kind of encouragement:

Definitely! Do it! It's very rewarding – seeing a student finish and join the work force (Participant 3).

Another cautioned about the commitment required:

If you like your job, you'll take a student and it will be good. If you're tired, stressed with the work you could just see it as one more stress (Participant 7).

Another supervisor pointed to a range of benefits in having students:

We need people capable of clinical practice. There is a benefit to the agency every time. There are personal benefits too such as students observing my practice; it's mutually beneficial. I encourage students to do this like a job application – they are active players in the process (Participant 1).

There were advantages for supervisors too, with placements seen as opportunities where experienced practitioners could:

(t)ake advantage of the knowledge that students bring. We're out of date depending on how long it's been since we qualified (Participant 5).

The opportunity for experienced workers to reflect on their own practice was also seen as valuable:

They're learning – they're questioning and learning. I find it keeps my practice fresh. I'm keeping up with new ideas as I have to go and read up on things. They ask you why you do things, and make you reflect better on your own practice. I just love watching them develop. Even challenging students are good in that way (Participant 4).

These supervisors welcome the challenges that students bring and are not afraid to expose their own practice to student scrutiny.

Measuring success

It is one thing to offer an exceptional learning experience. It is another to know that the student, the agency and the university are meeting the learning and practice outcomes for the student. The supervisors all offered the view that effective supervision is integral to evaluating student learning and competence. Whether formal or informal, the importance of supervision, discussion and reflection as the major method of evaluation was clear. Listening to the students' experience is central to evaluation, for many of the respondents. Supervision discussions offer an ideal environment for the give and take and reciprocity Kolb et al (1995) identify as one of the features of effective adult learning, and as a place where learning can be assessed in a non-threatening way, as these examples show:

Ask the student to name how they are going, for example fears, skills, theories etc, or the supervisor will name them. The supervisor and the student are both measuring and naming (Participant 1).

Another supervisor provided an example of how she assesses progress in supervision:

Lots of discussion in supervision – just assessing how they are doing their tasks, talking about each case. If it's a project, it's about where are you up to? how are you feeling about it? (Participant 4)

Most supervisors emphasised using learning plans as a tool for measuring learning (Knowles, 1986) with several highlighting the student's ability to articulate their learning goals, and to discuss and review progress on learning goals during supervision, as an important tool for evaluating student progress. One supervisor said:

Evaluation is fortnightly really, through using the learning plan as a tool in supervision (Participant 4).

Four of the respondents mentioned measuring students' progress against goals, agency standards or milestones, as a way of assessing student progress. One did this formally, using agency criteria:

I see if they're meeting agency KPI [Key Performance Indicators], maintaining statistics as required (Participant 1).

More than one supervisor listed the items that follow as indicators of success. The figures in brackets represent the number of supervisors in the research group who mentioned this item in their answer to the open-ended question on how they evaluate student success:

Students initiating a plan for their clients or projects and then checking back with supervisors (5/7);

Positive feedback from other staff members (2/7);

Positive feedback from clients (3/7);

Confidence increase in the student (4/7);

Direct observation and witnessing skill development (4/7);

Increased ability to relate theory and practice (3/7);

Excitement in the student about learning (4/7); and

Having them challenge the supervisor, or suggest alternative strategies (3/7).

Supervisors added that the following strategies helped in the evaluation of a student's development: celebrating success, regularly asking the student how s/he thought s/he was going, and treating the student like a staff member. There are echoes of Senge's (1990) learning organisation features here. Supervisors also commented that when progress was not being made as well as expected, making swift contact with the university liaison academic was recommended so that challenges could be worked through.

UNIVERSITY ROLE

Supervisors see the university liaison role as providing positive support for student learning. The contacts with the liaison academics, and particularly the visits, encourage the student

to complete specific tasks. The liaison academics can set up deadlines, provide feedback, get the placement back on track and address problems early. As one participant said:

Liaison starts long before the student gets here. They've helped the student work out what sort of placement they want. The liaison person is part of the student's team. On liaison visits here, the student is the host and takes responsibility for that through negotiations, booking a room, making a cup of coffee or tea – it's all part of their learning process (Participant 2).

Face to face visits from liaison academics were seen to be especially valuable:

At the moment we have phone contact, then a mid-placement face to face visit – the face to face is really important if things aren't going well: what are we going to do? If it's going OK we can sit and talk about why and how (Participant 4).

The value of the liaison visit included its contribution to measuring the progress of the placement:

Mid placement face to face reminds you of where you are going. Liaison people have a more objective measure of the placement (Participant 5).

Supervisors appreciated the relationships they developed with liaison academics, as the following comments show:

(Students) prepare and do a presentation at the mid-point. Pretty often it's three face-to-face visits because we're really close to the uni here and we've known the uni staff for a long time. They're very supportive and we have good relationships as well as geographic proximity (Participant 6).

Continuity of relationships was seen to be important:

I have had the same person each time – and having that relationship helps. It's less stressful knowing the person. It's a shared process now – how do we do this together? It makes a difference. There are clear expectations about the role and the liaison person having an understanding of your agency – when negotiating activities, the learning plan etc (Participant 4).

Clarity about the liaison process and the role of the university was also welcomed:

[University] are sensational. I've had a student from another uni and found them wanting. I'm a [University] graduate so I guess I am one-eyed! [University] is very clear re time, guidelines, placement interviews, visits, following up, they write you a thank you letter at the end – they're very clear about it all. The other uni was abysmal. No clarity. I felt sorry for the student. The mid placement visit is ideal. It's good for the student and the supervisor to have that face to face with the uni. They're very clear about where everyone's up to. It gives an academic overview of the process (Participant 7).

Another supervisor commented on the importance of a local connection:

Here in town we know the schools and they know us. We're out there doing guest lectures etc and

we have good interpersonal relationships with their staff. We can send emails; we know who we're talking to. Without that local base you wouldn't necessarily know the liaison person before. It's not ideal. It's more formal and difficult to do the job. It's best to know people locally (Participant 2).

Opinions varied among the supervisors about the usefulness of video-conferencing for the mid-placement visit. Some thought it was successful while others found it inadequate. Such ambivalence is not surprising, given the available research on the general lack of confidence and skill in social work in the use of technology (Hayhoe and Dollard, 2000; Humphries and Camilleri, 2002). The confident use of technology in rural education is still developing, although some distance education providers, such as Charles Sturt University, are leading the way (Alston, 2007).

CONCLUSION

Our findings show that organisations in which successful placements are embedded demonstrate commitment to ongoing professional development and supervision in practice. By this demonstration they promote in students the relevance of continual skill development and the integration of theory in competent professional practice together with a critically reflective approach. The organisations and supervisors use a range of structured formal learning experiences and unstructured, as required, activities. The supervisors are open to being observed, questioned and challenged. Supervisors prepare for the practicum and review their knowledge of the learning process and university procedures before accepting students. Supervisors of successful placements also engage in training offered by universities and welcome the contact.

Supervisors in our study actively demonstrate adult learning principles in the way they work with students and can articulate the learning benefits of the strategies they use. They deliberately set out to identify the student's learning style and seek to modify the learning experience to enhance the student's learning opportunities. Successful supervisors take their role as educators seriously. This is especially obvious as they seek depth of understanding in the student, not just surface level task completion; they talk about quality of learning not quantity of tasks. It is clear that successful supervisors are committed to perspective transformation in the student and subsequent skill development that the student will go on replicating because of the integration of new learning into their notions of quality practice.

The most obvious characteristic of these successful supervisors is that they enjoy supervision, enjoy students, engage with the students and are interested in them. They all recognise that students are on placement to learn and to receive accurate appraisal of their knowledge, skills, values and attitudes so that they can build themselves and their futures.

In response to the concern about limited opportunities for direct practice placements that was the original impetus for the study, we have demonstrated some features of successful placements that could be adopted by less experienced supervisors keen to contribute to student learning. A way forward may be to formalise the recognition of competent field educators and to encourage them to act as mentors to others who are at the beginning of their careers as supervisors or who are employed in agencies where encouragement to

take students may be required. Universities could facilitate this by offering study units at postgraduate level for supervisors, with a Recognition of Prior Learning process for experienced supervisors.

It is also worth considering how to construct better networks for supervisors in rural areas where professional isolation is often a feature of social welfare work. Open and distance learning opportunities, online support and video links into professional development activities, may provide ways for rural and remote supervisors to connect with others at similar or different levels of experience.

Recent research into educational experiences of regional and rural social work and welfare professional in regional New South Wales has shown a strong link between a successful placement experience in a regional/rural organisation and a new graduate applying for a position and then staying in rural/regional communities (Western Research Institute, 2010). Encouraging positive placement experiences, then, is one strategy to address the continuing recruitment and retention problems in rural and regional Australia.

The findings of this research provide a beginning identification of the components of successful direct practice placements in a rural area. We suggest that further research needs to build on these small beginnings to develop a resource for practitioners considering the possibilities of offering student placements. The educational practices documented here offer a suite of strategies and techniques used by successful supervisors that could be transferred to any rural social work or social welfare placement setting. Such a resource could be distributed online, through rural education and practice networks and as curriculum material in the formal education of field educators in organisations.

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ADVANCES IN SOCIAL WORK AND WELFARE EDUCATION

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There are two sections in which papers are published: refereed papers; and practice reflections. Refereed papers should be no longer the 6000 words. Practice reflections should be no longer than 1500 words and should focus on recent events or current topics of interest to the journal audience of social work, welfare and/ or community development educators and students. Both refereed papers and practice reflections must conform to presentation and referencing style of the journal (see preparation of copy).

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4. Notes should be kept to a minimum and combined with the text whenever possible. They should be numbered serially and placed at the end of the paper, as endnotes, before the references.

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7. Paragraphs should be separated by double spacing, without indentation.

Editorial Policy

Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education is the journal of the Australian Association for Social Work and Welfare Education (AASWWE), which is published twice yearly. The journal is managed by an editorial committee comprising national and international membership appointed by the Executive of AASWWE. There are two sections for publications: refereed publications and practice reflections. Refereed papers are anonymously reviewed by two readers of a panel of national and international reviewers. Reviewers are asked to offer constructive feedback to authors. Papers submitted to publication in the Practice Reflection section are reviewed by Editor and, in some instances, by a second member of the editorial committee.

The journal aims to showcase material which is of relevance to social work and welfare educators nationally, and where applicable, to link this with international concerns. Papers which present innovative or challenging approaches to current educational philosophy and methodology are particularly encouraged. The material should be original and professionally presented. However a diversity of styles is welcomed, and reports on research from a variety of perspectives and research designs are particularly sought. Submissions from students and field educators are particularly encouraged, as are research or discussion papers that focus on field education and practice teaching.

If Conference Papers are submitted then only an Abstract of the paper must appear in the published Conference Proceedings. All papers are published on the condition that they are the original work of the author and not published in any other form elsewhere.

Articles may be accepted, returned for the revision, or rejected. The editorial committee may make minor alterations to articles on their own initiative. The decision of the editor is final.

Subscription Costs

Individuals: $50.00
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Review And Publication Process

The following is a summary of the review and publication process of the Journal.

Once a paper for consideration in the refereed publication section of the journal is received, the editorial committee decides on which reviewers the paper will be sent to - this is not just a random choice. Reviewers are selected because of their knowledge and interest in the topic to be reviewed. The name of the author is not disclosed to the reviewers. Papers submitted for consideration in the Practice Reflections will be initially reviewed by the editors or editorial board who may then seek the advice of other members of the editorial committee in making a final determination about publication.

In the case of refereed articles, the article is returned to the editors with reviewers' comments attached. All reviewers review papers on a voluntary basis, as a service to their profession. Authors should allow three months from the time the article is received by Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education before expecting to receive reviewers' comments.

The editor responsible for leading the particular issue of the journal will make the final decision about the manuscript. If an article is resubmitted following authors' responses to comments, the editor may then return the article to one of the original reviewers or the editor will make a determination about the suitability for publication. The editor's decision about the acceptance or rejection of the manuscript for publication is final.

4. Once an article is accepted for publication, the editorial committee has the job of proofreading, editing and deciding the appropriate journal edition for publication, position, layout, etc. The editors are also interested in improving the clarity of unclear or woolly writing and may rewrite sentences and sections to improve clarity or expression.

8. Finally, the Journal is sent to the printer.

9. The time, from acceptance to publication, will vary according to the number of articles awaiting publication, length of article, topicality and publication of special theme issues.

10. The authors for the article receive one complimentary copy of the Journal in which their article appears.