Pre-placement Skills for Social Work Students

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ABSTRACT

Social work skills are a key component in the social work education curriculum yet there is little agreement in the literature on which skills should be acquired prior to placement. In an effort to address this gap, this article will outline the results of a qualitative research project wherein semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight field educators in a South Island region of New Zealand. The findings of this research identified categories of skills that are important for students prior to placement. These skills include communication, self-reflection, critical thinking, social work process, application of theory, and cultural practice. Ensuring the alignment of apposite skill development between regulatory bodies, social work academics and field educators is important for the effectiveness of social work education

Keywords: *Field education, Skills, Social work education, Students*

INTRODUCTION

Social work practitioners and academics agree that preparing social work students for placement is a necessary step in the education journey (Bogo, Lee, McKee, Baird, & Ramjattan, 2016; Douglas, 2008; Walton, 2005). Learning practice skills pre-placement understandably increases student performance during field education (Kamali, Clary, & Frye, 2017; Tompsett, Henderson, Mathew Byrne, Gaskell Mew, & Tompsett, 2017). Students on placement are usually in direct contact with clients in social service organisations and so, for their benefit, they need to be prepared with relevant skills that will enable effective interventions (Walton, 2005).

In New Zealand, social work students are required to be prepared for field education placement with appropriate skills (Social Workers Registration Board [SWRB], 2016). The skills itemised by the SWRB include: "interpersonal skills, self- awareness, social and emotional competence, appropriate professional conduct, reflection practice, awareness of the importance of supervision and risk assessment" (SWRB, 2016, p. 5). While this catalogue of skills gives social work educators guidance on what to include in the curriculum, it is unclear as to whether there is agreement on the most appropriate skills students should have prior to their placement (Moriarty & Manthorpe, 2014). It is important that the skills taught within social work education are based on research evidence so that this aspect of the curriculum is robust (Karpetis, 2017; Moriarty & Manthorpe, 2014). This article focuses on field educator perspectives on the core skills that students need prior to their social work placements. These practitioners work at the 'coalface' and so are able to comment from a position of experience about the range of skills needed by social work students (Fook, Ryan, & Hawkins, 2000). While there have been a number of studies that discuss skills required once in practice, such as communication and attributes such as emotional resilience, no studies have identified skills that are necessary prior to embarking on field education experiences (Grant, Kinman, & Baker, 2015).

LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been no empirical studies found on the skills necessary for students to be competent in prior to placement. That said, the literature does highlight some author perspectives on specific skills required for social work practice more generally (Ballantyne, Beddoe, Hay, Maidment, & Walker, 2017; Trevithick, Richards, Ruch, & Moss, 2004). Trevithick (2012), for example, has compiled a list of 50 skills including open questions, using silence and advocacy. Also, there is literature on the broader areas of readiness for practice and pre-placement preparation. It is this literature which will inform this overview.

In New Zealand, a project entitled 'Enhancing the Readiness to Practise of Newly Qualified Social Workers' (ER2P) has endeavoured to address a gap in research around the readiness to practise of social workers (Ballantyne et al., 2017). A taxonomy of terms was identified from the current curriculum taught in a majority of New Zealand social work programmes. Included in this taxonomy were the curriculum areas of knowledge, theory and skills. As the project aimed to create a framework to clarify the capabilities of newly qualified social workers it did not include information specific to the teaching of pre-placement skills (Beddoe, Hay, Maidment, Ballantyne, & Walker, 2018). That aside, the analysis of what

is currently taught in the curriculum of 14 social work programmes provides valuable knowledge about what social work educators within tertiary institutions incorporate in the way of skills (Ballantyne et al., 2016). Several skills were identified in the declared curriculum such as listening, facilitation and reflective practice. These offer signposts as to what skills have been deemed important by educators for the development of beginning practitioners.

Research into preparation for social work practice has been conducted in a number of countries including the United Kingdom, United States (US) and Australia (Bogo et al., 2016). Despite this, no studies have been found that focus specifically on what skills should be taught prior to placement. The preparation for practice studies instead concentrate on the effectiveness of classroom teaching rather than outlining specific content (Bogo et al., 2016; Bogo et al., 2011; Gockel & Burton, 2014; Logie, Bogo, Regehr, & Regehr, 2013; Walton, 2005). Given the broad range of skills that social workers generally use in practice, including in the New Zealand context, there is a need to establish what skills should be taught to social work students prior to placement (Hay & O'Donoghue, 2009; Trevithick, 2012).

Academics, practitioners and students have all agreed that active listening skills are important to be skilled in prior to practice (Dixon, 2012; Domakin, 2014; Flynn et al., 2014; Gockel & Burton, 2014; O'Connor, Cecil, & Boudioni, 2009; Rogers & Welch, 2009). Researchers also tend to agree on the following skills as being important: written communication; assessment; reflective practice; self-awareness; critical thinking; and relationship building (Bogo et al., 2011; Leveridge, 2003; O'Connor et al., 2009; Wilson, 2013). In the US context, several skills are taught pre-placement including court techniques, safety on placement and developing emotional resilience (Kamali et al., 2017). This research also highlighted the anxiety that students experience on placement and the importance of student preparation to reduce this anxiety. No specific self-management skills were, however, mentioned or training curriculum detailed.

Preparing students with the skills they need to manage the emotional aspect of social work has been given considerable attention (Beddoe & Maidment, 2009; Grant, Kinman, & Alexander, 2014; Ikebuchi & Rasmussen, 2014). In particular, students should be prepared with ways of actively building their own emotional resilience through reflective practice, the use of supervision and mindfulness (Grant et al., 2015). O'Connor et al. (2009) undertook a mixed methods study at London University to ascertain the usefulness of pre-placement learning. Rather than outlining which skills were taught, this study instead outlined *how* the skills were taught, for example through structured observation (O'Connor et al., 2009). The student participants were invited to consider what helped or hindered their preparation for placement in relation to their academic learning. Students identified several skills that were beneficial for their placement experience including self-management, self-awareness, emotional regulation, managing conflict and teamwork. O'Connor et al. (2009) concluded that the academic staff underestimated the personal development students needed for placement preparation.

Experienced field educators are well-placed to discern what skills social work students need prior to placement. The desire to ensure that social work skills education remains relevant

for practice and that educators are appropriately preparing students for diverse social work contexts was one of the motivations for this research (Bogo, 2015). By improving social work education in the areas that field educators identify, academia can remain responsive to practice environments and also strengthen this important partnership (Mirabito, 2012). Further, the research sought to address a perception that social work education is not grounded in the realities of current practice (Domakin, 2014).

METHOD

A qualitative methodology was adopted for this study so that the perspectives of individual field educators could be heard. A constructivist approach was seen as relevant as knowledge was constructed through conversations between the interviewer and the participants (Morrow, 2005). Constructivist theorists believe that meaning is created in relation to context (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). In this case, the field educators' understanding of social work skills is created in relation to their experiences and the context in which they work. This qualitative research was conducted with field educators involved with the University of Otago's social work programme. Field educator perspectives were sought on this issue as these social workers are knowledgeable about the range of skills needed in social work students and they are able to comment from experience (Fook et al., 2000).

The participants were recruited using a list of field educators who had provided support for University of Otago social work student(s) in the two years prior to the interviews (2015–2016). The field educators were required to have a social work qualification and to have been involved in field education for at least three years. As the interviews occurred before social work registration became mandatory, not all of the social workers were registered.

Ethical approval was gained from the University of Otago research ethics committee prior to undertaking the study. The researcher was connected to the participants as a field education coordinator and as a member of the social work community. In order to avoid a conflict of interest, the invited participants were not working with the researcher as a field educator at the time of interview. Ten responses were received from the email invitation to take part in the study and eight people chose to be interviewed as participants. The participants were employed in non-government organisations and district health boards. It is likely that a combination of agency constraints contributed to social workers in child protection being unwilling or unable to participate. Around the time that the email was sent to potential participants, major changes were happening within statutory social work that may have prevented these social workers from being able to participate.

The research question guiding the project was: What skills do social work students need prior to placement? Semi-structured interviews enabled the exploration of this research question with the field educators. Participants were encouraged to discuss the skills they considered important in their own training and in their contact with social work students on placement. Most of the participants were interviewed face-to-face with one using the online platform Skype. This method of interviewing was a deliberate strategy to increase the likelihood of interactive conversation (Crotty, 1998). Having a conversation in person increases the likelihood that the interviews are comfortable for the participant and

encourage a shared understanding about the participant's experience (Crotty, 1998). These conversations were voice recorded and then transcribed. All participants were invited to review and edit their transcript.

The interview transcripts were analysed using the thematic analysis guidelines set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). While some authors believe that thematic analysis is a tool rather than a method, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that it is a "method in its own right" (p. 78). Interview transcripts were coded manually for initial themes that related directly to the research question. Codes were then organised into themes and sub-themes. At this point, any codes unrelated to the topic of student social work skills were not considered. The themes were then organised using the relevant coded quotes. These themes were analysed further for alignment with the research question, relevance, cohesion and delineation through this process of quote selection (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Refining and defining the themes was the final stage of analysis prior to writing up the findings.

RESULTS

The field educators drew on their own experiences of social work training alongside their experiences of educating social work students. The themes elicited from the data have been divided into categories that relate to skills deemed necessary prior to placement: communication, self-reflection, critical thinking, social work process, application of theory and cultural practice.

COMMUNICATION

Communication was identified as a broad category containing several skills that were framed as foundations for social work practice. The specific skills were active listening, professional writing, and the use of communication technology. The importance of active listening skills was a consistent theme in the interviews. This skill was framed as foundational for social work practice. The active listening skills included paraphrasing and paying attention to non-verbal communication.

> Active listening…letting someone know that you're hearing them…is actually essential in social work. You need to be a good listener and you need to be able to feedback what you heard. (Elaine)

Professional writing was also discussed as a skill that should be taught prior to placement. Field educators emphasised the importance of writing in different formats including emails, case-notes, assessments and reports. There was an acknowledgement that written communication would be developed further during placement as each workplace had their own conventions and requirements.

Field educators anticipated that students would be able to demonstrate communication skills with both clients and agency staff. Creating relationships with agency staff, for example, was considered an important skill. The relationships students build with staff allow for ease of work partnerships. As Fiona said, "working with clients [is] sometimes… the very easy part…the much harder part is how you deal with management or colleagues."

Students "aren't wasting time if they are taking the time to form relationships" (Fiona). Elaine indicated that attention needed to be paid to collegial relationships:

> I think there's some basic tikanga [etiquette] almost in a workplace and that's things like acknowledging and getting to know all the staff, and having an interest in their work as well. (Elaine)

> Explicitly linking group work skills from the classroom environment to teamwork in placement was also suggested. Group work can help teach students how to "work with people that [have] very different learning styles and very different time management skills" (Fiona).

Knowing which medium to use to communicate effectively was also considered to be part of the communication process. In social work agencies, for example, communication is not only conducted through the forms discussed above but also through telephone. Social work students sometimes needed coaching in using telephones in the social work context:

> That always needs a wee bit of work just around understanding what information to share over the phone. What to leave on a voice message, what to kind of wait. And if you set up an appointment, what information you could share over the phone, what should you hold back until you meet with somebody. (Claudia)

Several of the participants discussed texting, which has become a common communication method with clients. Field educators hoped that students had some ability to judge the right time to use this particular method of communication. Fiona used a humorous example of why using texting may not be the best form of communication in all circumstances:

> There's a whole lot of stuff that is formal, and you're not going to be chatty with the person, like "hi just letting you know I've called Child Youth and Family lol" [laughs], …or "called Child Youth and Family angry face". (Fiona)

Almost all participants believed that the majority of students come from a generation more familiar with the technical aspects of technology than they were themselves:

> Technology in terms of their skills, I feel that this generation of social workers are pretty technologically awesome, I wouldn't have anything to add there, other than management of their presence and their interactions on that with their clients. (Beth)

A couple of participants, however, voiced some concern that the use of technology had advanced ahead of the current workplace guidelines. Other participants had built conversations on the ethical use of technology into the induction of students. Helen, for instance, had noticed that the use of technology to contact clients easily created potential issues with students blurring the boundary between personal and professional time. When talking about clients, Helen said:

> Their main form of technology is Facebook messenger. [That's] going to be the easiest way to get a hold of them. (Helen)

And regarding students:

> How do we manage at night time when people go home? Do they turn their phones off? Are they taking calls? (Helen)

Encouraging ethical boundaries around the use of communication technology, whether it be telephone calls, texting or Facebook was seen as a necessary part of field education preparation.

Self-reflection

The participants connected the skill of self-reflection with self-awareness and critical thinking. All of the participants referred to the importance of students being able to uncover their own judgements, recognise what was informing those judgements and being open to other ways of seeing. When discussing students' worldviews, Beth reflected, "the skill is the ability to identify your values and judgements…to be cognisant of what you are doing".

Students were expected to have a well-developed awareness of their own values so they could be self-reflective. Beth and Claudia spoke about this in relation to their own training:

> The most important stuff was around that self-reflection. Yeah, I really think that that was an important piece for me. Just being able to kind of acknowledge where I sit in relation to my views about people. And I think it really kind of helps you think about your own judgements and things you take into your practice subconsciously. (Beth)

Self-reflection also required an ability to be vulnerable and to have self-knowledge. Without this self-knowledge, the ability to be self-reflective was compromised, particularly in the supervision space.

> I think students sometimes struggle with that, having a good knowledge about themselves and what they bring in to a conversation…sharing information about themselves, sometimes. (Claudia)

> I've had students that have been extremely reflective, have understood the need to be really open and honest in supervision and share not only the good stuff but the stuff they didn't do so well. I've had students that are quite reserved about that, they'll only tell you the things that they did so well. (Claudia)

Encouragingly, Belinda had seen evidence of social work students coming to placement already equipped with the skills of self-reflection. She also indicated that students were aware that reflective practice was a continual process in the course of placement:

> The [students']…ability to self-reflect really comes through and that's obviously something that they really worked on. And expect to do. And I think that's testament to what's being taught. So, it just goes to show what you can teach, these kind of soft skills I guess they are, do translate into practice. They're really reflective people that exist out there that have come out of here so that's been really quite cool. (Belinda)

Along with self-awareness was the ability to learn self-care, and Isla used the analogy of first aid:

> It's like First Aid. If you don't put your own mask on, you can't help anyone in an emergency on a plane or if you don't get out of harm's way when you are trying to rescue someone, you could get run over therefore you can't save anyone else can you? Stop! Assess! Proceed. I often use First Aid Practice as an analogy in the work. (Isla)

Self-reflection was linked into the ability of students to manage boundaries and ethics while on placement. Participants emphasised that was important for students to have some understanding of professional ethics and boundaries prior to placement. Ethical practice was defined in participants' conversations as recognising ethical dilemmas, establishing appropriate boundaries and using a method of decision-making.

> I mean the ethics is really important, the ethics and boundaries…being able to stay safe and being able to practise in an accountable way. I think that things so quickly go wrong when people aren't really clear about where the boundaries and ethics lie. (Claudia)

Critical thinking

Participants named the ability to critically think about government legislation and organisational policy as a significant skill that should be learnt in their training prior to placement. Fiona and Beth deliberately had conversations with students in placement to explore how legislation and policy affected clients and constrained social work practice. When Elaine was asked what was useful in her own training, she said, "I think analysis of policy, and also being able to link that governmental policy to everyday life in terms of how that affects people." Beth indicated that being aware of wider issues was an important part of social work:

> There's no point trying to come in and do stuff without understanding the factors at play, actually having a bigger play than you probably hope or wish they were [laughs]. That awareness of the role of government, the role of funding, all of that. (Beth)

Critical thinking can also prompt an awareness of social justice issues and a number of participants referred to learning about social justice principles as an important part of pre-placement training. Helen, for example, discussed "notions of social justice and anti-oppression, anti-discrimination…the political nature of social work, which wasn't in any of my other domains." In referring to "other domains", Helen was indicating that this was not something she learnt from previous life experience prior to training. Fiona expressed the opinion that students needed to be de-programmed from neoliberal theories that they receive through their secondary education:

> For them is needing to have…a revolution in thinking in like "how does the world come to be the way it is", so that sense of history, that sense of self, that sense of critique, ability to critique and understand why others might see them in positions of privilege. (Fiona)

Social work process

Students were expected to begin placement with some knowledge of the social work process, including assessment and intervention. Assessment skills were emphasised as an important component of pre-placement teaching, as learning how to do a thorough assessment was seen as beneficial for students when they engaged with clients during placement. Alex acknowledged that he would not assume students would be able to do an entire assessment with a client in their first week of placement but he expected them to have an initial understanding of the information they needed for an assessment:

> Definitely need to have some assessment skills. Especially where they are meeting people for the first time… I know it's a big expectation on the first placement for a student to be able to do sit down and do a proper interview with a person, getting everything you need but, being able to plan what we are going to ask. (Alex)

Participants also wanted students to learn about intervention and evaluation skills prior to placement:

> Assessment, intervention and evaluation. There has to be some congruence between information gathered at the start and the work that is done with that person. I think that can be learnt in the classroom. (Alex)

The participants agreed students should have theoretical knowledge and the skill of applying theory to their placement experience. This was seen as important in terms of evidencing social work decisions to other professionals but also as a way of knowing what underpinned their decision-making. Being able to look at situations from a number of different perspectives and have an "ability to be able to at least try and discuss where they're coming from in terms of their work. What's guiding your practice?" (Beth) was viewed as essential.

Cultural practice

Five of the participants offered their views on learning about working with other cultures, especially in reference to their own training:

> Coming from a small town…coming to university and learning about bicultural practice was a big change for me.... Being able to come to university and start engaging in those conversations was incredibly valuable. (Claudia)

Those who had a positive experience of cultural education talked about acceptance, welcoming and working alongside others. There was mention in the participants' discussion that Māori and non-Māori working alongside, and learning from, each other was a way to overcome cultural barriers and reduce monocultural ways of practising. As Isla explained: "actually getting people alongside of you and seeing some good things about Taha Māori [the Māori perspective]". Effective and enjoyable bicultural education had also occurred for participants during training outside of the university spaces. Isla referred to the educational spaces created by Māori as "breaking down barriers".

There was not unanimous agreement about the importance of bicultural education and one participant indicated that this was over-emphasised in the tertiary curriculum:

> My experience of the University was that it was very much focused on being aware of Treaty of Waitangi, not necessarily being aware of other cultures…That was something that surprised me going into practice. People of Māori ethnicity generally didn't care about that, they didn't understand it, they didn't know it. That's not to say it's not important and we shouldn't know it. It was not the big deal it was made out to be. (Alex)

Multicultural practice was discussed in relation to bicultural practice with biculturalism being the foundation on which other practices lie.

> So, the bicultural being in my view like the basis and the foundation in which we all work, but the how do we then spread that out to – are we expected to be competent across all – how do we deal with that? And how do we talk about the third culture or – and how do we be competent with that? (Beth)

Students were expected to have a beginning awareness of appropriate working with different cultures: "I guess that's where that self-awareness comes in and that ability to kind of reflect on what we're bringing". Similarly:

> It's just making sure that we don't go in with our own prejudices, our own concepts. The door will open. If we don't know what they're talking about, "I'm sorry for my ignorance, what do you mean?". "Can you explain that to me please 'cause I'm really interested in finding out so that I can learn as well. So that I don't step on toes." It's being a naïve enquirer. (Isla)

The ability to work with diversity was linked to factors other than skills, for instance, the personal quality of openness was considered an important attribute for students working with other cultures.

DISCUSSION

This research is important, not because it produces any surprising findings, but because it identifies skills necessary for students to learn prior to placement. The opinion of the participants in this study regarding the importance of using active listening skills to build relationships is corroborated in other research (Tompsett et al., 2017; Trevithick, 2012; Trevithick et al., 2004). Courage to operate from a position of valuing active listening skills within social work is an issue in a time when there is pressure to spend less time with clients and communities (Gambrill, 2013; Richards, Ruch, & Trevithick, 2005). It is encouraging that, despite the complexities of the current social service environment, active listening skills are still considered a core skill of social work practice in this study (Richards et al., 2005).

The ability to use communication technology appropriately is a key skill identified by participants. Communication technology includes email, telephone and social media. The introduction of the internet into the world of social work has led to increasing use of email communication along with other internet resources (Beaumont, Chester, & Rideout, 2017;

Beddoe, 2016; Thompson, 2015). Knowledge about the appropriate use of communication technology is essential to ensure good social work practice (Voshel & Wesala, 2015). The participants echoed the statements of other researchers on the imperative for students to develop etiquette around the use of communication technology (Beddoe, 2016; Trevithick, 2012). In New Zealand, the SWRB Code of Conduct and the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Work Practice Standards are useful resources as they reinforce ethical practice using technology. Similarly, the Australian Association of Social Workers Practice Standards have comparable guidelines (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2013).

Comparing the findings of this study with the SWRB prescription around skills curriculum prior to placement shows similarities and variation. The SWRB specify that social work programmes must prepare students to communicate, reflect, be aware of their own emotions and conduct themselves professionally. They also stipulate that students must be taught about supervision and risk assessment (SWRB, 2016, p. 5). All of these skills were included in the findings; however; the emphasis of the participants did not specifically relate to the importance of supervision, risk assessment and professional conduct. For example, supervision was mentioned by participants in relation to the skill of self-reflection. Self-reflection was discussed by participants as the necessary skill to learn in order to make use of supervision. This finding aligns with previous research on supervision (Davys & Beddoe, 2010). Pre-placement learning around self-reflection encourages students to utilise supervision in more depth (Davys & Beddoe, 2010). The skills that were mentioned in the findings, but not in the SWRB specified skills curriculum, were critical thinking, social work process, application of theory, cultural practice, and the use of communication technology. Most of these skills are included in broader curriculum requirements stipulated by the SWRB with the exception of critical thinking and communication technology skills (SWRB, 2016). It would be beneficial for these skills to be included in the revised programme standards.

Encouraging students to critically analyse the impact of government policy and legislation is already a skill taught in social work education (Ballantyne et al., 2016). The participants' perspective on the importance of teaching students to be critical thinkers also reflects previous studies (Fook, 2016). Interestingly, critical analysis is not mentioned in the list of skills that the SWRB require prior to placement (SWRB, 2016). This may be because it is considered part of the wider curriculum requirements in terms of social justice and human rights. Students can be encouraged in the classroom to recognise and critique the neoliberal discourses that shape government policy and the use of critical thinking makes it more likely that social work students will remain mindful of sources of oppression (Beddoe & Keddell, 2016; Gambrill, 2013).

Assessment is part of the broader social work process. In the SWRB Recognition Standards the word 'risk' is placed in front of assessment when discussing skills necessary prior to placement (SWRB, 2016). Assessment involves assessing risk, however, continually emphasising risk over other areas of assessment means that it becomes seen as a priority, sometimes unhelpfully (Maidment, 2003; Morley, 2016). The participants in this research viewed assessment as an important skill but did not separate out risk assessment from the overall skill of assessment. This is in keeping with social work academics who encourage a critical approach to the use of risk assessments (Morley, 2016).

Finally, learning spaces that support Māori perspectives were emphasised in this and in previous studies (Hotere-Barnes, 2015; Walker, 2012). Education spaces designed to support Māori learners to assist non-Māori and Māori to be educated about colonisation and the Māori worldview (Walker, 2012). Learning skills to work with Māori needs to be done within the context of Te Ao Māori (the world of Māori) (Hollis-English, 2012). This skill development is necessary prior to embarking on placement.

Limitations

The research had a number of limitations including the number of participants and a lack of specific definitions. This study involved a small number of participants and involving a larger number of participants would, potentially, improve the results. The terms used by the field educators to describe the skills were not classified. In attempting to gain an understanding of numerous skills using the language of participants, an opportunity to classify skills was missed.

CONCLUSION

It is encouraging that social work academics, field educators and the SWRB are, in general, in agreement on the pre-placement skills curriculum. For those involved in teaching skills prior to placement, this research can further inform what is necessary for student learning.

Social work education is a collaborative process between social work programmes, social workers in the field, and students. Continuing conversations and research about how best to prepare students for their field education experiences are of benefit to all stakeholders, particularly clients. The research in this area would be strengthened from including students and clients in future conversations.

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