Preparing Students for Social Work Practice in Contemporary Societies: Insights from a Transnational Research Network

Abstract

This paper arises from the work of a transnational research network investigating social work education. University based social work programmes from four European countries (Ireland, Italy, Norway, and the U.K.) shared a similar concern: *how educators can support students to prepare for social work practice*. The relationship between social work education and practice is not straightforward; the partnership between educators and practitioners in helping social work students to flourish in practice remains a complex and, at times, controversial issue. Furthermore, it is not enough to help students learn the mechanics of day to day tasks, it is also important to motivate them in becoming social workers stimulated by principles of human rights and social justice. With this in mind, each educator conducted a local study using qualitative and/or quantitative methods to explore what influences the development of such practitioners. Analysis from the studies indicate three key issues for social work education in the European arena: developing strategies to help students in *preventing and overcoming "practice shock"*; *the promotion of coherence* as a way to bring into focus the complexity of the interrelationships between theory and practice; and *the active engagement of students and practice teachers* in the evaluation and development of contemporary social work education models. Despite the very different welfare and education systems of each country involved, several similar themes arose, and this commonality is something to be celebrated in a discipline which has a global universality.

Introduction

How education programmes nurture students to become social workers remains a controversial debate and a complex issue. It is complex because it involves different actors, models, approaches, and systems. The undertaking to educate anti-oppressive social workers is interconnected with several variables on different levels of the welfare system and requires coherence and prudence. Due to the core tenets of transparency and challenging discrimination in the social work profession, it is important for academic and practice educators to show coherence between what they teach to students and what they expect from them; this involves congruence between the principles that inform

social work (IFSW, 2014) and those that are transmitted through learning activities. The ambition of this network's initial collaborative project was to explore the theme of the preparedness of students for social work practice in contemporary societies. Within this framework and through a transnational lens, this paper presents four different studies conducted in The Republic of Ireland, Italy, Norway and the United Kingdom.

The research context

This research network was formed following a workshop run by the special interest group (SIG) on Social Work Education at the ESWRA conference in Aalborg in 2017. It became apparent that many participants were managing the competing tensions of their own national government's requirements and guidelines with a desire to retain the IFSW definition focus of Social Work as a global discipline. Four of the members continued to collaborate on this topic and subsequently set up the research group. Drawing on the shared interests of group members, the first project sought to investigate the question of *how best to prepare students for social work practice*. A particular aim was to explore how educators and students can assist each other to improve the effectiveness and potential of these programmes.

Social work as a discipline operates within distinct structures and systems in each country context, and this is reflected in the respective education programmes. Acknowledging these differences, and the particular interests of individual group members, each research project explored different but complimentary elements within the wider group focus of preparedness for social work practice. Methodologies similarly varied according to the specificity of each study, incorporating sample sizes reflective of local education programme populations, and utilising relevant data collection tools including surveys, semi-structured interviews and Delphi-technique approaches.

Research participants comprised undergraduate and postgraduate social work students, academic educators, and fieldwork practice teachers. Overall, more than 150 students and 50 practice educators were involved as both participants and co-researchers.

The aim and associated costs of each study were supported by the authors and their Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Each HEI's ethical research committee approved the individual author's research proposal.

The specific focus of each study was:
- the students' perspectives on their readiness for professional practice (Ireland)

- the relational dimension of practice placement experience (Italy)
- the promotion of coherence in the transition from education to professional practice (Norway)
- the impact of students' felt agency on placement (U.K.)

<mark>Whilst the findings of each study were specific to the relevant context, many of the key themes which arose were resonant for all four researchers and their institutions, suggesting a communality of experience in the development of practice readiness between the countries in this network.</mark>

How much agency do social work students have whilst out on placement? Perspectives from an English study

This section will use an incident discussed at length in one of the focus groups at a University in the North West of England. The tensions between the different roles and responsibilities felt by different stakeholders was a major emergent theme from all of the data. It is not only the interaction between opposing tensions but the weight of the various responsibilities and roles that we need to take into account. A good example of this is where academic tutors have reported complex interactions between their own discipline's expectations, that of the University's requirements of being student-centred whilst also complying with quality assurance standards (Bhuyan et al, 2017, Melin et al 2014). This could equally apply to responsibilities and roles experienced by students and practice educators.

To improve social work education, we have to understand the wider societal issues that are influencing the process (Bellinger, 2010). The data being used as a platform for this section of the article was from the undergraduate focus group with five non-traditional female students. All of these students had additional caring and life responsibilities. The focus group was held after their first 70 day placement was completed successfully. This particular group of students were keen to further explore their thinking and learning about their placement experiences (Lewis & Bolzan 2017, McSweeney & Williams, 2018). Actual quotes from the focus group are in square brackets [ ]. This focus group discussion focused on one member's difficulties in her placement, and her practice educator's erroneous assumptions about the student's value system (Bundy-Fazioli et al, 2013, Lam et al, 2007). The student felt unable to challenge her practice educator openly or to share her concerns immediately with her link tutor from University because she was worried about failing her placement (Flanagan & Williams, 2018, Barlow & Hall, 2007). The strategy she deployed was to not [tell her] but [show her] through her practice. The student was concerned that the support in place would have penalised her, not supported her. This

is backed up by Guransky & le Sueur, who said collaboration in a tripartite (student, tutor and practice educator) learning contract was not always authentic (2012, p 921). This led onto a discussion about power and how to challenge those who had 'perceived' power over you as a student and future practitioner (Flanagan & Williams, 2018). Such an example of a student in difficulty on a placement could be seen as students learning to navigate the 'swampy low-lands' of practice (Hosken, 2018, Schon,1983) after being on the 'terra firma' of classroom based learning. From the very honest and open discussion with the group it was clear that this situation is much more complex and involves many different social roles and experiences. Although it is important to interrogate the specific dynamics, it is also appropriate to consider aspects of the wider environment. Not doing so could be seen as taking a positivist stance that focuses on the individual locus of responsibility rather than looking at the societal forces that impact on students' experiences and the academic staff responses (Garrett, 2010, Fenton, 2014). This wider environment has three components to consider which can either interact positively or conflict with each other:

1)   Growth of academic capitalism (Todd et al, 2017) where students are paying more in fees and Universities operate as commercial enterprises. What that entails for meeting targets, attracting students and funding. Students can exercise their consumer rights if they are dissatisfied with the 'product' they receive, yet concurrently feel disempowered by the consumerist label.

2)   The neoliberal discourse which is associated with academic capitalism also has had a huge impact on the delivery of social work education. Both Fenton (2014) and Garrett (2010) articulate the harmful impact neoliberalism has on the structure and delivery of social work education.

3)   Postmodernism, an opportunity to focus on different 'truths' being valid for different people, an opportunity to deconstruct the hegemonic beliefs and practices used in society (Hosken, 2018) with creative alternatives and critical thinking (Hugman, 2003, Irving & Young, 2002). This can be time consuming and quite 'messy' but is ultimately required for effective practice (Danto, 2008). There is a need to question why these factors may influence the situation where a student felt silenced but chose not to confront her practice educator (Oliver et al 2017). By choosing not to speak up, it could be seen as the student not being assertive. Instead she deployed a strategy that was [getting her head down] and [proving herself] before being able to mention her concerns [very gently] during a three way meeting. The student raised her concerns then as there was evidence of her effective practice. She used this evidence to demonstrate her view that her belief system enhanced

rather than impinged on her practice. This student used her peer support well, and came up with a successful approach that would not put herself at risk as a marginalized woman and student on placement which was geographically and emotionally distant from campus (Lewis & Bolzan, 2007). Using a strengths-based approach (Saleeby, 2006) and reflecting on her success was more effective than pointing out the strategies she had not deployed. In many ways this student opened up a new pathway of enquiry about how students bring together the different elements of their lives to successfully traverse their social work placements (Flanagan & Wilson, 2018). The takeaway message from this situation for academics could be about how to better support students on placement. It could also look at how we work with practice educators in being aware of power dynamics. However, if we focus solely on these individual strategies without paying attention to how the socio-political environment impacts on the experiences of students, we will fail. We have to recognize the shifting sands of wider society to support our students' development (Jarman-Rhode et al, 1997). Our goal should be in facilitating resourceful and creative learning professionals not students to be moulded into the 'correct' practice tropes. The next section will look at adopting a theoretical framework to support educators in promoting readiness for practice.

Sense of coherence and preparing for social work practice: perspectives from a Norwegian study

The analysis here is from a qualitative study in Norway based on interviews in two focus groups. Group one was comprised of students in the last year of the bachelor's program. In Norway you become a professional social worker after a three year bachelor program. Group two was comprised of social workers after one year in the profession. Participants in both groups were enrolled on the same programme, at the same HEI. There were five participants in each group and the interviews lasted for approximately two hours, which provided a detailed dataset of approximately 60 pages of transcribed text. We assume that there is a close connection between a recognition of being prepared and ready for professional practice in social work and the opportunity to establish meaningful connections between theory and practice in the discipline. This section focuses on strategies and challenges in establishing such relationships among both social work students and professional social workers. The research questions we pose are: How do students of social work and professional social workers establish meaningful connections between theory and practice?

In education research, the term *coherence* is often used in studies of the connection between education and practice (Heggen et al. 2015). The term is inspired by Anton

Antonovsky's (1987) *Sense of Coherence*. Meaningful connections do not exist in themselves, they must be created (Hatlevik & Havnes 2017). Smedby and Heggen (2014) state that "coherence may be appropriate to focus on the complexity of meaningful connections between theory and practice" (p. 72). In light of a purpose of preparing students for social work practice, several forms of coherence are important. Program coherence focuses on meaningful connections between different parts of the education program. Transitional coherence focuses on the relationship between education and competence requirements in professional practice, and is even more important in this context.

How to do Social Work

The interview with the students in group one is characterized by the image of what will be required of them as professional social workers from a position as students in their last year in education. This is perceived as conflicting. One puts it this way: "Can still be terrified by thinking that in June I should be ready". This is a tension that is reinforced by the relationship between the image of what they can do and the image that professional social workers "are in fact responsible for other people's lives". About education, they say that "we learn that all things are connected" and that "I need some pegs to hang it on". The relationship between theory and practice in social work is complex, and students struggle to establish meaningful connections between what they have learned in education and a perception of what will be required from them as professional social workers. The dynamics of the tension we describe here are created and maintained by a rather instrumental approach to meaningful connections. *Sense of coherence* becomes a matter of *how to do it*. The following statement is a typical illustration: "We want to know how to use the knowledge we gain when we come out in practice. Because we're stuck a bit like that in a way. (…) What will be our task at all? " Social work is not only characterized by a complex relationship between theory and practice, but also by a very diverse field of practice. The development of knowledge through education seems to be followed by another development among students; a stronger recognition of everything that they don't know and can't do.

Puzzle pieces and relationship skills

The participants in group two describe the education, and their perception of it, through one year of experience as a professional social worker. There is no significant difference between the way the education is described in group two and the description we got in group one. Puzzle is a central metaphor, "There are still puzzle pieces (...) what will be the picture in the end?" Although the picture is not clear, they have established an image

that the puzzle pieces will constitute a holistic picture in the end. Such images can in themselves be a source of sense of coherence. However, there is another distinction that seems to make a significant difference to group one. Two main features make up this distinction. The view of theory in social work has changed. It is less an instrument that addresses specific practices, but more a perspective on social problems. "We see things more in context (...) looking more behind the problems". And the notion of social work practice is also less instrumental, and more relational. "We work a lot with relationships, and I think social workers are very good at it". The perception of what it means to be prepared and ready for professional practice has thus changed radically after the transition from education to the profession. The education does not complete the preparation, but is recognized as the start of an everlasting preparation. The following statement expresses such understanding very clearly: "I think social workers can go to work right after education and discover: Oh my God, so much I could do in this situation! And that feeling I think you can still get after 10 and 20 years."

Coherence and transition

This study has a relatively limited data set, yet clearly shows that the transition from education to professional practice is a crucial shift in the recognition of being prepared in social work practice. *Practice shock* is a term often used to articulate such an experience of transition from education to professional practice (Fauske et al. 2005; Al-Ma`seb et al. 2015). Here, however, it is more relevant to describe the shock as a *practice anxiety* (Geirdal et al. 2019) that disappears rather quickly through the realisation of coherence between theory and practice after a short time as a professional social worker. Such a finding may have many implications both for understanding of program coherence within education, and for transitional coherence between education and social work practice.

To guide and to be guided towards social work practice: perspectives from an Italian study

The study in Italy was conducted through the involvement of students, educators and practice teachers. Good teaching comes from "the identity and integrity of the teacher" (Palmer, 1998, p. 10) and educating students for reflexive practice requires prudence, care and courage. Mentioning a previous scientific article "Courage to Teach for Social Work Educators" (East & Chambers, 2007), teaching social work is a science, an art form and a passion (p.810). To accompany students in positively meeting the reality of social work practice is a complex and dynamic process nurtured by the relationships between students, educators, practice teachers, and service users. It is a whole orchestra (Hay, 2019).

In a traditional way, practice placement experience is regarded as the activity through which students can see and put into practice what they have learned in theory. Previous studies have widely argued that introducing students to social work practice is not only a matter of knowledge transfer from the theory side to the practice side. Neither is it a simple interaction between students as academic-users, and professors as academic-providers. The Italian study focused on undergraduate practice placement experience in a dialogical way, involving students and practice teachers. The starting point was the students' perceptions of a gap between theory and practice. From several cohorts, alongside general satisfaction, students reported a common challenge: the challenge to integrate theory and practice.

Practice teachers described their role through Delphi-technique

Utilising the Delphi-technique, a group of 23 expert practice teachers were selected and involved in the research. The criteria of selection was at least three consecutive years as a practice teacher. Through two different rounds, practice teachers were invited to describe their role. From the participants emerged three main descriptions.

In practice placement experience, they considered themselves as:

- *mediators between theory and practice*
- *guides towards the reality of fieldwork*
- *stimulators of critical reflection on the students' motivation to become social workers.*

Practice teachers were asked to share suggestions and requests useful to better the practice placement experience. Their suggestions: increasing the amount of exchange between placement and academic educators; to promote a joint reflection on the practice placement experience; to have more information about the students' academic curriculum. Beyond that, they asked to be "assessed by the students", to receive feedback on their role in order to improve their own practice.

Sharing a conversation on practice placement experience

Through group encounters, students, practice teachers, and educators grouped together to share a conversation on the practice placement experience at the conclusion of it. When practice teachers and students grouped together, their viewpoints pointed to some core topics of social work education:

1. The kaleidoscopic responsibility to educate a social worker

In social work education, responsibility is not thought of in a formal sense but rather as an apprehension of and care for the other's vulnerability (Jonas, 1979). During the conversation between students, educators and practice teachers, it emerged that the challenge of social work education involves a kaleidoscopic responsibility: towards the society, towards the profession, towards the students, towards the service users, towards social justice and towards science. Additionally, the same students, social-workers-to-be, cannot be excused from holding personal responsibility for actively participating in and improving the social work education system.

2. The practice placement is a challenge not only for students

There is an extensive literature emphasizing the importance of field education in the professional learning of students (Hay, 2019; Chilvers, 2018), and it is argued that the first practice placement for all students is expected and demanding (McSweeney & Williams, 2019; Flanagan & Wilson, 2018). It is less discussed that practice placement is challenging and demanding for educators and practice teachers too, even after several years of experience. During the group encounters, students discovered that doubts and anxieties are not only for them, but also for practice teachers, even if "expert". Practice teachers expressed their worries and uncertainties showing an ongoing learning humility that positively influenced the students. Practice teachers said that the challenges to be practice teachers can be coped with through a process of self-reflection and collaboration with the academic educators. Wendt and Seymour (2010, p. 671) describes the importance of reflexivity in social work and states that 'if we fail to critique our practice then we neglect that we always have room to improve at a personal and professional level'.

3. The collective learning for students and practice teachers.

During the group sessions, practice teachers expressed the concept that the relationship with the students is for them a two-way relationship. A relationship of reciprocal learning and sometimes a source to revitalize the personal motivation and to improve personal effectiveness. For example, during a group encounter, a practice teacher told that she was living a moment of professional discomfort due to organizational changes. She recounted that she received help and new motivation from the student to successfully cope with the burnout moment. Another practice teacher said that the student stimulated her in revisiting methods of interventions. In practice placement experience it is not only students that learn, and the benefits are mutual.

4. To guide and to be guided towards the reality of social work practice is an act of reciprocity

For students to become effective and morally upright social workers their abilities must be both human and technical. To guide a future social worker and for a student to be guided, is a demanding and collaborative process, an act of reciprocal responsibility that goes beyond formal collaborations (Folgheraiter, 2004). From the research, it emerged that the best solution to cope with the challenges of the experience felt by all parties was the relationship between students and practice teachers, ensuring that there is a dialogic space, and for the reciprocal nature of learning to be respected. If theory remains the domain of the academic world and practice the domain of fieldwork placements, the discipline is destined to perpetuate misunderstanding and to produce a fragmented, incomplete, and shallow knowledge that encourages students to reproduce this dissonance. Social work education requires to educate autonomous, reflective and value-conscious social workers. Similar skills are required also for educators to accompany students towards the reality of social work practice. To assist social work students in recognizing the privilege of power in social work settings requires academics to balance and at times to redistribute the power in the education process.

Like a Jigsaw Puzzle Coming Together: **perspectives from an Irish study**

Social work is arguably positioned as a 'moral profession' (Preston-Shoot, 2012:19) underpinned by principles of dignity, human rights, and social justice (IFSW, 2018). Social work educators therefore seek to ensure that graduates are prepared for the complexities inherent in practicing in an ethical manner within contemporary societal contexts.

Questioning how social work students experience such preparation, was the genesis for this small scale research study. The researcher acknowledges the student as the critical player in the change process. When given the opportunity to identify what they recognise as having most influenced their learning and professional development, students can offer unique insights into this process, and hence inform future programme design.

33 social work students enrolled on either an undergraduate or postgraduate degree programme in one university in the Republic of Ireland, provided their perspectives on how 'ready' and 'prepared' they felt for fieldwork practice at discrete points over two academic years. Data collection, in the form of a qualitative online survey and subsequent focus groups, took place at three phases between the point at which they embarked on their first period of fieldwork placement, and the cusp of graduation. The researcher thus

hoped to capture student development across the figurative journey from layperson to qualified social worker, drawing on ideas first put forward by Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1980: 5) in their "novice" to "expert" model of skills acquisition.

Prepared and ready?

The choice to pursue a social work career begins before entering the education programme. Evidence suggests that students are frequently drawn to the profession because it is compatible with their own personal belief system (Baretti, 2004; Bradley et al, 2012). The findings of the Irish study support this understanding, with novice students recognising the influence of prior life experience, family structure and values, religious belief, and a desire to '*be of service*' to others, on their social work aspirations. Over their two academic years of study, students identified a difference between "preparedness"-comprised of practical factors such as knowledge and skills gained through college and prior work environments, and "readiness" - defined as a mental state influenced by confidence, acceptance, and generally, "*feeling okay*". One student at first phrase commented: *"the college makes sure we are prepared; however, it is very difficult to know when you are ready."* Almost two academic years later, at close to graduation, the psychological readiness was achieved for these participants, but the practical preparation continued: *"two years of college has made us ready, now we need to prepare for the job".*

Separate or integrated learning contexts?

Within college classes, experiential approaches to learning, where students actively performed learning tasks and applied knowledge to new scenarios, were identified by participants as most effective in preparing them for future practice. Additionally, lecturers who were perceived as "*passionate*" about their teaching, were recognised as most influential on student professional formation. A perception a dichotomy between college and placement, as two distinct centres of learning, was present at the novice stage of development, with students believing that *"certain things"* could only be learned in the fieldwork environment. Once students encountered practice reality however, there was more of a sense of integration between the academic and placement contexts: *"All theory I learned came alive on placement: like a jigsaw piece finally coming together"* . One of the most significant themes to emerge was the influence of the individual fieldwork practice teacher. Students described practice teachers as "*mentors*" drawing learning from observing the practice teacher "*in action*" with clients. The role of supervision in encouraging reflection on practice was also highlighted as critical, with references to "*challenging my beliefs*" and "*encouraging me to look at the client's circumstances from a new perspective*". Students were acutely aware of the power

dynamic inherent in the practice teacher-student relationship, and whilst the vast majority of practice teacher influence was deemed positive, a less constructive theme for student wellbeing also arose. There was a perception amongst a cohort of students that individual practice teacher approaches had greater influence on placement outcomes than student capacity: *"I had a good experience on placement but only because my PT was very supportive. Others did not have a good experience purely based on their PT's and not their ability"*. Another participant described a practice teacher's use of power creating a placement environment akin to "*The Hunger Games*".

Bringing it all together

Findings from this small-scale, limited study, indicate that perceptions of 'readiness' and 'preparedness' for practice are different, but complimentary, concepts. The centrality of the fieldwork experience to the student's opportunity to integrate theory with practice is long acknowledged (Bellinger, 2010; Shulman, 2005). From the perspective of the student social workers in this study, fieldwork and college aspects of the programmes are perceived to enhance one another, culminating in graduates who feel mentally ready for the demands of the profession, but may require some focussed preparation for the workplace. However, no student is an empty canvas, the process of becoming a social worker begins before the formal education process, and both field and college educators have a role in encouraging reflective enquiry to ensure awareness of the influence of values and beliefs on practice with the marginalised and vulnerable. Educators in both contexts can spark learning and development through demonstrating passion and enthusiasm for the profession. Mirroring findings from neighbouring jurisdictions (Domakin, 2015; Finch, 2013), practice teachers are seen as central to professional formation, with students acutely aware of the power inherent in the assessment role. Quality assurance in this area is therefore essential, not just to mentor the performance of ethical practice, but to promote student wellbeing and self-efficacy. The lack of the practice teacher voice is a limitation of this study and, given their centrality to students' perceptions of their readiness for future practice, the benefits of greater collaboration between students, college and practice teachers in programme planning and review are indicated as an area for future study in the Irish context.

Challenges and strategies to prepare students for practice: discussion

<mark>As can be seen by the elements of the individual studies represented here, there are commonalities between countries which can assist our efforts to understand and enhance the experience of social work education and practice readiness from a transnational perspective. Preparing</mark> for social work practice is a complex endeavour. It is a process where we can find clear tensions, meaningful connections, and significant relations. As mentioned in the introduction, the four studies that we have presented here were not designed for a comparative purpose, they are methodologically different and also have different theoretical perspectives. Social work education in the four countries also differs in terms of content, structure and duration, and there are differences between the welfare systems each social work student will practice within. Nevertheless, our studies shed light on several common challenges in the relationship between education and practice in social work. We have chosen to highlight three of these challenges, along with some potential strategies to address them.

Experiencing practice shock: the importance of recognition and open dialogue

We see in all the studies that preparation for practice in social work is demanding and discomforting, as a transition from the "terra firma" of classroom based learning to the "swampy low land" of practice. This concerns both the transition to fieldwork placement within education and to professional practice after qualification. *Practice shock,* as mentioned above*,* is a term often used to describe such tensions. We see through our studies that practice shock is a phenomenon that is expressed in different ways. It is, on the one hand, a recognition that comes as a result of experience as a practice student. Here, we highlight the vulnerability and powerlessness students may experience within the framework of educational systems that are perceived as more oriented towards producing graduates, than to educating autonomous, reflective, and value-conscious social workers. We also see that this vulnerability is not only found among the students, but is also a challenge for practice teachers. On the other hand, the practice shock, or practice anxiety, is created by the recognition among students of the competence requirements and complex responsibilities that they will meet as professional social workers in various social services in their future careers. These findings present opportunities for social work education programmes to embrace. All coping strategies could start with the recognition of the existence and experience of practice shock in its different forms; to recognize the challenge is the first step to coping with it. Educators could organize open dialogue sessions involving students and practice teachers. In this

session it could be useful to name and recognize the impact of practice placement, but also to analyse strength points to counterbalance worries and anxieties. Developing strategies to help students to prepare for practice shock and anxiety prior to fieldwork exposure, and to subsequently debrief, has the potential to build resilience and further support students in their journey towards becoming autonomous, values-led professionals.

Developing a sense of coherence: supporting future practitioners to be both prepared and ready

Our studies show that developing a *sense of coherence* is a complex task in the transition between education and professional practice in social work. We argue that this is particularly challenging in social work, since specific theories only to a small extent address specific practice. But we also see that a deeper understanding of this challenge can be a source for preventing and overcoming the practice shock discussed above. The conceptual distinction between being *prepared* and being *ready* is a fruitful approach. Developing the knowledge and skills to create the meaningful relationships which underpin the social work discipline, are essential to student/graduate preparedness, but our students have also shown us that developing a sense of confidence and psychological readiness for the work ahead, is equally critical.

These are two different dimensions of the connection between education and practice that are part of a dialectical interaction. This interplay is apparent throughout the education experience and continues into the graduate's career as a professional social worker. A strategy to support the development of coherence in social work students is to be coherent; academic and practice educators too have the responsibility to be engaged in processes of self-reflection in which they analyse their way of thinking and their way of teaching. College based academics evidencing a passion for the practice of the discipline, and field-based practice educators demonstrating a similar enthusiasm for the theoretical foundations, may be seen to support the transition process. We therefore argue that a clearer and more nuanced understanding of the challenges of creating a sense of coherence is a good starting point for preparing students for practice in social work.

Meeting the challenges together: collaborative planning and evaluation

Our studies also show that preparing for practice in social work is not a challenge that students can be expected to meet alone. It is a process which involves both academic educators and practice teachers as well. It is thus not just a question of what the challenge is, and how that challenge can be understood and met. It is very much a question of who should be active and involved in the strategies. This means that social work programmes

must develop models to evaluate the education in a collaboration between three actors; academics, practice teachers and students.

Respecting differences of roles and tasks is important in the education system, but these differences should not limit the capacity and commitment to work together and learn from each other. How to help students in meeting social work practice is a matter of reciprocal teaching and learning, combining different sources of knowledge.

Specific proposals for such models are not included in this article due to lack of space and believing that it would not be appropriate in a transnational study. Models for such collaboration and active involvement must be developed to suit different educational programmes in different countries. However, we strongly argue that such collaboration and active involvement in education is not an extraordinary measure that is outside of the remit of the educational programme, rather that it must be included as a core strategy in constructing social work education.

Conclusion

A recurring theme for all of the studies was the complex relationship between education and practice in social work. What conditions in education are crucial to developing students' readiness for practice? Social work is a value-based profession and discipline, and we understand anti-oppressive practices as a basic value of social work. Hence we need to support students to transition into autonomous, reflective and value-conscious social workers. Even if the context of these four studies is different, we see common challenges for the education of social workers in the context of neoliberalism and postmodernism in today's Europe. The results of all these studies must be understood as an opposition to a view of education where students are perceived as consumers of state specific knowledge and skill sets. We also strongly refute the claim that the purpose of social work education is to deliver ready-made candidates to meet only the requirements of the state welfare services.   We will conclude that contemporary social work practice requires education that is mutually co-constructed by all stakeholders, and gives students the opportunity to develop capabilities in being autonomous, developing their critically reflective capabilities, and integrating their conscious awareness of values into their future practice. The themes raised by participants could have come from any or all of the HEIs, this raises the question of who should be responsible for social work education, national governments and national organisations? Or should social work programmes draw on more internationalist perspectives? From this limited study we recognise that the similarities of social work learning experiences are far greater than the differences. The development of social work education programmes appears to be within the remit of each individual government. Perhaps it is time to challenge this and to begin to develop the

transnational development agenda that sets aside the parochial schemes related to welfare and political systems.

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