The Integration of Personal and Professional Selves: Developing Students' Critical Awareness in Social Work Practice

Abstract

How social work students incorporate personal and professional selves in the contexts of field education represents a cornerstone of effective and sustainable practice. This paper presents a qualitative component of a study that tracked 15 third-year bachelor of social work students across their first field placement to document their use of self, critical reflections and experiential learning. The project examined students' assessed 'use of self' assignments to understand their capacity for and development of critical awareness across this placement. Students were most articulate in being able to identify stressful situations that arose from placement in terms of what they were thinking (mind) and feeling (emotion) and to a much lesser extent to what they were sensing (body). Over time, students demonstrated a growing critical awareness to better identify and respond to their self-reported tensions. The findings provide developmental insights into how students integrate personal and professional selves and potentially shift from reflective and reflexive practices to incorporating praxis in their work. Through considering the linkages between self and practice, this paper explores student experiences whilst on placement and the associated developmental tasks of critical awareness.

Introduction

Field education represents a formative and substantive opportunity to experientially apply class-based learning in professional social work contexts. Giles, Irwin, Lynch, and Waugh (2010) recognise practicum experiences as transformational learning where students are engaged intellectually, emotionally and socially to think about professional practice. It is within these learning contexts that students are encouraged to critically consider how their own personal histories coincide with their work and with others—whether it is working alongside individuals, families, groups or communities. These experiences represent where the 'rubber hits the road' as students discover the complexities of applying their learning to professional social work encounters. The particular path that each student travels, however, is unique and highlights the need for social work field coordinators, supervisors and educators to better understand how field education placements can lead to greater personal and professional awareness.

It is the field-placement setting, where the student, agency, and clients all bring particular histories and ways of seeing the world that can create a number of experiential tensions. Such tensions may arise through power relationships, the development of professional

identity and questions of reflexivity where previous assumptions are possibly tested for the first time in significant and profound ways. To capture this learning process, this paper presents a study that tracked 15 social work students' written work about their experiential learning whilst on field placement over four months. By incorporating how students conceptualise and locate self in practice, this paper explores the developmental tasks of critical awareness and the role of social work field education to support this process.

Cultivating critical awareness in field education contexts

Social work research has consistently identified field education as one of the major components in which students can experience the unfolding of theoretical learning into practice (Guransky & LeSuer, 2012). These experiences represent an opportunity for students to cultivate both professional and personal skills by developing self-awareness, self-care, empathy, critical inquiry and an increased experience and understanding of power dynamics. Recent studies in social work education reveal the tensions within these contexts relating to how students integrate self and theory into professional practice (Beddoe, Ackroyd, Author 2, & Author 3, 2011; Irizarry & Marlowe, 2010) and how to assess the competence of a student's ability to critically reflect on their practice (Bogo, Regehr, Katz, Logie, & Mylopoulos, 2011).

Field practicums for students can be overwhelming, particularly when they are faced with challenging situations where tensions and dilemmas between personal and professional values can arise. Although a potential learning challenge, finding ways to cope with such stress represents a crucial part of professional development. A positive outcome is that, when personal values, beliefs and perceptions are challenged, students are encouraged to re-evaluate and deepen their understanding of themselves and others (Bransford, 2011; Lam, Wong, & Fong Leung, 2007).

Developmental stages of critical awareness

Understanding the developmental process of critical awareness encourages students to make necessary connections between experiences, the associated knowledge gained from the experience and how to critically reflect on their 'use of self' in action (Higgins, 2011). Critical awareness involves deepening the understanding of the students' perceptions and other people's perspectives and involves being able to identify social location alongside power dynamics. The facilitation of critical thinking is, therefore, an important pedagogical

and professional outcome for social work educators when assisting students in their development of building practice wisdom.

The concepts of reflection, reflexivity and praxis have been identified as developmental tasks for professional social work and used as a guide in social work to inform and improve practice (D'Cruz, Gillingham, & Melendez, 2007). These authors note, however, that confusion exists between such terms—particularly with reflective and reflexive practices. For the purposes of this paper we have defined below our understanding of reflection, reflexivity, and praxis. We have also added another stage in the developmental process referred to as 'pre-reflection', as we found in our research that some students did not appear to demonstrate, or had not yet integrated their understanding of, reflection as it relates to professional practice.

Pre-reflection: At this stage, 'all knowledge is assumed to exist absolutely and concretely' (King & Kitchener, 2004, p. 6), or more simply stated, what a student believes to be true, is true. In pre-reflection, a student's beliefs, values, assumptions of knowledge and associated actions are unexamined and unjustified. This state is similar to Mezirow's (1991) described condition of non-reflection.

Reflection: Reflection is when an individual has developed the ability to process and evaluate actions previously taken in practice to enhance learning and/or to create change (Dempsey, Murphy & Halton, 2008; Schön, 1987). As suggested above, the action that flows from reflection varies in accordance with the philosophical orientation adhered to. For some the improvement sought may be more pragmatic in nature (e.g., Schön, 1987) while for others the change identified may be inspired by a greater critical/transformative agenda (e.g., Fook & Gardner, 2013; Freire, 2000). Despite the stated differences, reflective practice broadly coheres around a central aim, which is to illuminate the way we construct, make sense of, and talk about, social work practice (Harrison & Ruch, 2007; Ruch, 2009).

Reflexivity: The term 'reflexivity' is derived from the medieval Latin term 'reflexivus' meaning 'turned back' or 'reflected'. Reflexive practice occurs in social work when a practitioner has an awareness of situational contexts that include the use of language, power dynamics, and importantly, an awareness of how self (including emotions and cognitions) impacts on any inter/intra-personal process (Fook, 2013; Payne, 2005). Beddoe *et al*., (2011, p. 515), note the importance of "being able to take knowledge from one situation to another

and to be creative and flexible when faced with new circumstances." A reflexive act involves one critically locating the history that informs a particular belief or action.

Praxis: Praxis is embodied when a social worker, through reflective and reflexive processes, develops the aspiration and creative incentive to improve practice and make changes previously reflected upon. These changes could be made within social systems and/or in social relationships. Within Lee and Hudson's (2011, p. 165) empowerment model, they note that praxis involves an "action-reflection and action, action in reflection, and dialogue." Freire (2000, p. 72) offers a more interactional perspective, stating, "Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other." Praxis is at once the integration of tacit, experiential and formal knowledge and theories, which are 'reflected upon' in and out of action and transformed or manifested in creative action (Payne, 2005). This creative action is often an important precursor to social change.

Students will find themselves at different points on this continuum at particular times and in relation to diverse professional encounters. It is therefore important that students are equipped with the tools to recognise particular learning and experiential challenges that will arise inter- and intra-personally. This paper presents a study that tracked social work students across their first field placement to document their use of self and experiential learning to ascertain the pedagogical possibilities of facilitating critical awareness.

Study Design

This study examined 15 third-year social work students' written experiential assignments (a total of 60) which were assessed at four points over their four month field placement. Students completed four 'use of self' assignments (see Authors 1 & 3, 2011) which were designed to help develop self-awareness in practice and examine how 'self' impacts on practice. The assignments, which had an assessment rubric, were crafted to capture conceptual knowledge, tacit assumptions, intuitive insights, learning and sensory feedback on their responses to an event or situation they had selected from their current field placement. Students completed this 2000–3000-word assignment which was provided in a template form that included:

   a) discussing an event or situation and why the event was chosen;
   b) recognising aspects of self from this event;
   c) identifying the aspects of self that need more use in the associated practice task;

d) thinking about the impacts of this situation;

e) acknowledging challenges and strengths and the plan for future practice.

The textual information from the student's written work was thematically analysed by initial hand coding and then focussed coding with NVivo 10 to identify key categories (Saldaña, 2009). To establish inter-rater agreement, we examined each other's coding processes to mutually agree on our emergent categories. We then wrote analytic memos (Saldaña, 2009) about each participant's assignments and the associated categories that helped establish each student's learning progression over time and the ways in which they identified particular tensions arising from their field placement. These memos informed the analysis related to student's critical awareness across all four assignments along the lines of pre-reflection, reflection, reflexivity and praxis, as previously discussed. Again, these memos helped to establish agreement amongst the researchers about student learning.

Immediately prior to their field placement, students completed an intensive block course on professional process and practice that included teaching and applying the use of mindfulness. Part of this teaching process centred on students learning to actively attune to their sensory experience (i.e., comprising feelings, thoughts and somatic sensation) for the purpose of querying what they learnt about themselves and others, were challenged by, remained unsure of and needed to do/plan in the future. One component of this teaching is introducing students to the reflective practice process through the use of a defined range of mindfulness skills where they are introduced to the body scan and mindfulness of breathing within the first few sessions of the course. Lecture content details the connection between the mindfulness awareness practices taught and the relevance of becoming a reflective practitioner. Included in this process, are maintenance of reflective practice logs, small-group activity that engages the students in reflecting upon shared feedback around varying aspects of the course. The teaching process has been described elsewhere see Author 3 & Beddoe, 2011).

This student cohort was approached to participate after all their grades in the related courses had been finalised and 15 students consented for their work to be included in the study. The study received approval from the university's Ethics Committee.

Student Self-Reports of Practicum Experiences

The results presented report on the key themes that emerged from the analyses of the students' 'use of self' assignments. The coding identified three primary categories that are discussed further below: identifying tensions arising from placement; transitional spaces that helped students identify these tensions; and the associated transformative responses that ensued.

Identification of tensions—establishing a professional identity and organisational constraints

Overall, the main areas that students identified tensions in their placement experience were most often expressed in the sense of establishing one's professional identity in relation to their culture and history.

> My first reaction to this case was personal confusion. Through reflection I pinpointed that the personal confusion was due to my personal upbringing and my values, beliefs and different culture. I felt that there were logical answers to the client's problems, but had to remember to put my own thoughts aside to think and act parallel to the client, making the connection between my own assumptions and beliefs and the clients'.

The second most common theme related to power (most often within the organisation) where students highlighted the tensions that could arise from workplace dynamics, potentially oppressive practices and the perception that, as students, they had relatively little power.

> Throughout this meeting, I often heard myself thinking 'they [the professionals] are being so harsh on the client'... My core beliefs and values were beginning to surface during this interaction. I believe that there always has to be a middle point where the professional and client meet to both be heard and then to decide together what is to occur next. I also strongly believe that clients who have been in the 'system' for numerous years are significantly disempowered, not intentionally, but just by default.

These tensions often arose as students began to, firstly notice, and subsequently make decisions about how, when, and where to deal with these concerns. It was from this awareness, which often became more nuanced as the placement experience continued that students used different forms of awareness to help them to identify and transition to a particular response.

Transitional awareness across mind, emotion and body awareness

In the coding of the qualitative assignments, we looked for examples of student awareness of a particular tension across one or more of three different domains related to mindfulness (see Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

1. Mind (what students were thinking);

2. Emotion (what students were feeling); and/or

3. Body (what physical sensations were happening).

Students were taught these concepts before going on field placement and the results show that students were most comfortable and articulate in acknowledging tensions within the mind (thinking) and emotion (feeling) domains. By identifying these three domains initially as codes and writing analytic memos about these (Saldaña, 2009), we made a subsequent decision to determine the frequency of their occurrence across the transcripts. What we found was that the quality and frequency of codes related to mind and emotion were more insightful and reported in far greater numbers than those related to body awareness. For instance, of the 60 sources (participant 'use of self' assignments), we coded 59 sources and 362 examples of students identifying a tension through what they were thinking:

> This aspect of self is an on-going work for me as a beginning social worker. I feel that my internal reactions to situations are larger than my external and vocal reactions. Although I believe that this is a good aspect of self, as it enables me to process thoughts and reactions prior to expressing them.

Across emotion (feelings), there were 52 sources and 183 examples where students identified a particular tension through the way they were feeling. Whilst there were fewer total references coded for 'emotion', it is worth noting that the majority of students still generally acknowledged what they were feeling and this awareness helped them to identify stressful aspects of practice:

> Though I was able to be calm and professional about the situation when my supervisor explained to me that I wasn't allowed to give some of the clothes to the low income families, I didn't feel like working for the remaining of the day. I felt de-motivated because it was 'bad' news. I was also challenged by allowing myself to express my past experience and thoughts which were personal to me in supervision.

And finally, there were only 11 sources and 20 examples of students writing about what was happening in their body (muscular tension, breathlessness, sweating, etc.) to help them identify a concern. A student writes about this level of awareness in relation to a child-protection issue:

> The safety warrant was approved by a judge. In waiting for this to be signed I could feel my shoulders tightening and my mouth drying up. I was very apprehensive as to how this event was going to unfold.

Student's textual data indicated growth in the flexible use of attention over time. As the placement progressed, students appeared to become more proficient at recognising their own sensory triggers, notably of emotion and cognition in terms of frequency reported and most importantly, the sophistication of student's writing. Student awareness across body was non-existent in most of these assignments when discussing a tension arising from placement. As evidenced below, the four assignments each student completed and the associated coding evidenced a greater ability over time to articulate stressful situations and locate this experience, through the use of embodied knowledge, from an increasingly reflective and reflexive perspective. By the end of placement, students' noticing was more often accompanied by greater levels of decisive action. These developmental shifts suggest a burgeoning sense of professional identity.

Transformative responses—supervision and learning over time

Once students identified these tensions through the different types of awareness, the most common way of transforming this tension into an effective response was through accessing forms of professional, and to a lesser degree, personal, resources. The most common transformative response was identified as students accessing professional forms of resilience through supervision and debriefing with colleagues.

> My supervisor and I created statements that will encourage the both of us to identify that I need assistance. I will use these statements when I feel under too much pressure and will be well supported by my supervisor, therefore assuring that my exhaustion levels don't hit low again. This enables me to be open with how I am feeling (identifying my internal dialogue) whilst not feeling intimidated to do everything I am asked. My supervisor was very open to me expressing my thoughts and feelings around my emotional and mental exhaustion and we have put systems in place to make sure that I remain a healthy and well student practitioner.

Increased awareness of tensions and/or emotions later assisted in (and was used as a tool for) their own self-care and in critical reflection of their practice. As each participant was tracked for progression of learning over time, it was possible to ascertain and distinguish (through the memos written on each set of student assignments of reflective practice), reflexive practice or praxis (as defined in this paper) across their practicum experience. For example, the following student example shows her writing over the course of the practicum and increased levels of critical awareness:

Assignment One: I was caught in the moment with my attention distorted by excitement. I did not appropriately use my beliefs, values, and culture to inform the questions I asked nor did I use these to perceive the initial stage of information gathering" *(demonstrating reflection)*

Assignment Two: "I sensed that I was beginning to form an internal attitude in regards to this case. In reflecting, I believe that the use of my attentional filters became quite strong in forming the attitude and judgment toward the family …" *(demonstrates increased reflection)*

Assignment Three: "I became worried due to the fact that I did not manage self as I usually would have during the duration of this [distressing] event. This concerned me because of the impact that this event had on me mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually. I chose the event for this assignment to reflect and be reflexive in order to critique my use of self and clearly identify how these impacts will foster an improved, healthier, professional, and personal identity for me as beginning social worker." *(demonstrates reflexivity)*

Assignment Four: "I believe that I used my self-awareness well throughout this period and was committed to an open attitude and not playing the 'negative game'. By this I mean that I was able to recognise when the attitudes of others were deteriorating, and I was capable of removing myself from being conformed in this through regular breaks and deep breathing." *(demonstrates acting with awareness - praxis)*

This student's comments were compared to the memos we wrote which again showed a progression of learning across the practicum. Another student demonstrated this progression initially reflected on his cultural background in child protection settings and by the end of placement could not only identify key tensions but could locate these within a holistic context that created the basis to think about social change, the profession and his associated practice:

In this event there was a lot of underlying themes worth to reflect on in terms of values in social work. I ponder the question as to what really the best interest of child is and who practically determines it in reality. This 'radical' wondering is also somewhat derived from my personal and cultural background where the concept of best interest of child may be interpreted differently… I asked myself, "Is this the best practice adults and social work service can do?" Has every social worker involved in this family so far since their crisis been really collaborative and efficient each other? Where has the ideology of 'Strengthening Family' gone? Isn't it because the institutions (especially statutory)' tendency of 'risk-averse' or bureaucracy? Who actually determines this young person's destiny and what is the real rationale for that?

Students were found to be at different points on this self-awareness continuum and there was evidence to suggest that, for many students, their learning was transformative to greater levels of self-awareness over their four month placement. Another student in the early phase

of practicum appeared to conceive of knowledge as a source external to self where 'objective' truths could be universally and correctly applied to situations in practice. This form of awareness is reminiscent of King and Kitchener's (2004) pre-reflective thinking state. Later work from this same student demonstrated shifts to greater levels of reflection where their personal and professional assumptions were critiqued. This most clearly delineates a developmental shift. Likewise students who already demonstrated sound levels of reflection were beginning to move towards greater levels of reflexivity and for a few, towards praxis. These increased levels of awareness relating to discoveries of student 'use of self' were most noticeable in the majority of participants work by their third assignment. In part this was due to the marking feedback critique from university, further exploration in group supervision discussions during call-back days, and their familiarisation and understanding of their practice setting which augmented student confidence and competence in their ability to articulate (or explore and express) their experiences.

Discussion: Implications for Social Work Field Education

Learning to balance one's professional and personal life in social work practice is a critical part of field education. Central to the way in which students relate to self and others is understanding how practice is developed, interpreted and experienced. This paper reinforces the notion that there are developmental tasks to professional identity and that placing a particularly strong focus on this in the first placement is vital to assist students to shift from reflective practice towards reflexivity and praxis. As students' self-awareness and confidence grow, they learn to better articulate how their personal experiences, history and assumptions are informed by, and, in turn, affect practice. The students' comments and writing suggest that direct feedback, both through field supervision and responses to coursework by faculty teaching staff promotes student ability to communicate about their professional experience in clearly accessible ways. The student assignments also demonstrated transformative learning in relation to critical awareness over time and suggest that structured and scaffolded assignments about their field-placement experiences can assist students to engage with their professional development. As such, the study's findings provide three primary considerations for social work field education:

1. Teaching student awareness across mind, body and emotion helps students to identify key tensions and locate what these are in terms of what they are experiencing across

these three domains. Mindfulness practice represents a possible approach to scaffold this learning.

2. The predominant focus on 'who am I as a professional?' in the written assignments represents initial student developmental tasks that can assist with later learning.

3. Students are at different places with respect to their critical awareness as to whether they are able to incorporate reflection, reflexivity and praxis into their work and during stressful situations. The importance of supportive and critical supervision is vital to resolve tensions that arise from placement so that students can use such experiences as *transformative* to inform effective and empowering social work practice.

Student awareness across mind, body and emotion: The application of mindfulness

Students are able to recognise tensions in their practicum experiences in various ways. Understanding and being aware of stress as it is happening, by observing reactions and responses, set the practitioner at a distance from the experience and in this way reduces the negative impact from stressors. In this sense, student awareness of what they are thinking, feeling and sensing assist them to critically evaluate self and identify stressful events. This increased awareness and self-monitoring assisted students to observe, let go of, and later explore in more depth, their emotional reactions and responses. What was striking in the coding of the assignments was that students were generally strong at identifying their thoughts and emotions but rarely identified physical awareness as a source of information that related to working through tensions. The students who demonstrated praxis in their work most often demonstrated awareness across all three of these domains.

There is an increasing interest and evidence of the mind–body relationship and how our minds can affect our physical wellbeing (Graham, Graham, & Hick, 2009). The practice of mindfulness has the potential to improve student observation and awareness of sensations, cognitions, perceptions and emotional responses with full attention and without judgement (Napoli & Bonifas, 2011). Berceli and Napoli (2006) note that early attention to stress indicators, and acting upon these, can also help prevent burnout. Thus, cultivating critical self-awareness requires that students develop a deeper awareness of internal processing (mind, body and emotions). Mindfulness skills are known to promote this form of self-focussed observation. Our study suggest that finding effective ways to teach body awareness represents an under-utilised form of awareness and a pedagogical tool that can help students

identify and subsequently respond to difficult situations. Though a well-regarded and researched approach, it is important to note that mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR) was not taught to our students due to associated resourcing (financial and staff certifications) and time based constraints (see Baer, 2006). Future research that examines students' experiences of mindfulness with MBSR whilst on practicum would provide additional insight about its application for professional development.

Developing the 'who am I as the professional'—the developmental role of non-judgement

Students were asked a number of questions about their cultural values, beliefs and social histories that informed their perspectives and actions in powerful ways. Of particular interest was that students identified that being able to suspend judgement enabled them to develop an attitude of acceptance to their own responses/experience and feel more confident about 'being' in the moment with the client or situation. Growth in non-judgement, supported by a suite of mindful awareness skills (to review the mindfulness skills taught in the course refer Author 3 & Beddoe, 2011), is predicated on the capacity to notice the presence of specific feelings, thoughts or sensations without conceiving of them as fixed aspects of self (Baer, 2006). Openness to one's own experience and receptivity of mind is supported by this quality of awareness (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). In turn, this readies the student to observe their experiences and to be available to self and others in the practice context). In acquiring this ability the student learns to be consciously aware of their own sensory experience (of mind, body and emotion), but in that moment, also to be able to focus on, and enter into, a professional inter-personal relationship.

We argue that the initial development of a non-judgemental student practitioner is an important stepping-stone for students to recall, examine and critically reflect upon their interactions in practice. The attentional skills of mindfulness provide students with a tangible method of developing a capacity for use of critical awareness in their practice. A fundamental attentional skill in pursuit of this goal is the activation of 'observing mind'. This is achieved through sustained practice of present-moment awareness, noticing what happens moment-by-moment across the sensory fields of thoughts, feelings and sensation. Observing mind surfaces as the students become increasingly proficient in the attentional process described.

This capacity is a necessary forerunner for the development of critical awareness (Author 3 & Beddoe, 2011).

Whilst students demonstrated an ability to identify key tensions arising from their placement and the associated transformative responses that evidenced professional development over time, it also needs to be emphasised that there are risks to such development. One of the barriers which prevent students from becoming a critically aware practitioner is often their own ability to engage in personal reflection (Harrison & Ruch, 2007). Although there was initial reluctance to engage with mindfulness practice and the 'use of self' assignments for some, it was also evidenced by the reflections documented in the assignments that students perceived both tools as helpful tools for processing difficult experiences.

Supportive and critical supervision

A central component of critical awareness is to remain cognisant of the interplay of one's social background, cultural experiences and to apply this awareness to social work skills, knowledge and professional standards. It is essential, therefore, to have supervisors in the field who can assist students to articulate their thoughts and feelings, who can help coax out and 'extract' the as-yet-unspoken information from their heads (internal) into words that enable a description and exploration of experiences (external). Davys and Beddoe (2010, p. 29) discuss support as a core condition of supervision and point out that "supportive supervision encourages supervisees to express and explore their feelings and their work, not only so they will 'feel' better but also in order that they may 'know' their practice." Students predominantly noted that it was a supportive supervisory relationship that created a safe and inviting place which enabled these tensions to be explored. It, ideally, allows for students to be led through a reflective process to gain insight self-confidence and ways of using 'self'. This reflective process minimises blame, shame and doubt and identifies and applies creative and individual strategies in self-care and professional development to further strengthen their practice.

Whilst students themselves evidenced a progression of learning, it is important to also note the varied emphases and quality of supervision and support that is provided within agencies. It is this resource that can help students work with a particular tension in safe and solution-focused ways or limit a student's progression in cases where the level of supervision was experienced as less than supportive and robust. Such realities point to the responsibility of university field educators for working in partnership with agency-based supervisors so that

supervisors are best equipped to understand and support student learning whilst also meeting agency-based expectations and roles (Cleak & Wilson, 2013). It is a challenge for many student supervisors to set aside regular time for supervision in a busy and outcome-focused work culture. It is also an observation that supervisors are aware of their own professional supervision time often being compromised or impacted upon by these workplace restrictions (Giles *et al.*, 2010). When the agency culture is not conducive to reflective practice there is always the risk that the student will be influenced by the organisational climate. Both the tools of mindfulness and the structured 'use of self' assignment assisted the students to overcome this barrier by offering them a reflective tool to identify and consider the practice implications of unexamined and uncritical practice. It also encouraged students to continue practising in a reflective manner regardless of whether the rest of the system was working in this way or not. The 'use of self' assignment became, not only an indicator for the student themselves, but also a helpful tool for the university teaching staff to ascertain the level of safe and effective practice that was occurring. Whilst a useful indicator, a student's cultural background, the context of practice, placement agency and the placement supervisor all represent key components that influence student learning. It is within this understanding that field educators consider the varied pathways to critical awareness, which are conceptualised across diverse student experiences and within an ecological context that incorporates the social work agency, respective supervisors and university curriculum.

Conclusion

This research suggests that providing students with the 'use of self' assignment during practicum and facilitating growth in the attentional skills of mindfulness to students prior to practicum, assisted in the professional transformational and developmental learning processes. For educators, the 'use of self' assignment became a tool from which students' and educators could appraise the development of critical awareness. The ability to identify stressful situations arising from placement across mind, body and emotion represents a useful skill that can help shift students to more sophisticated levels of critical awareness.

Finding effective pedagogical practices for assisting students to increase their self-awareness and shift their perceptions in a scaffolded and safe manner represents a cornerstone of social work education. Providing critical learning experiences on practicum highlights that our work requires responding to the dynamic background and experiences of social work students alongside the agencies where they are placed. A productive practicum partnership between

student, fieldwork coordinator and agency supervisor/fieldwork educator enables opportunities for transformational learning and the development of critically aware practitioners.

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