

# An Unfinished Reflexive Journey: Social Work Students' Reflection on their Placement Experiences

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## Summary

The fieldwork placement is recognized as one of the major components of social work education and a major determinant of its quality. A key aspect of the learning process in the fieldwork placement is the exposition of practice encounters to the students' critical reflection. Given the importance of the process of 'reflection' or 'reflective learning', a qualitative study based on the reflective logs of social work students was conducted to explore the meaning of social work field education and the learning experiences of social work students during their placement. The study findings revealed that disturbing events experienced by students in their fieldwork were a catalyst to their reflective process. Meanwhile, their undue concern with knowledge and skills application within a circumscribed knowledge frame suggests the dominant influence of scientism and competence-based practice in social work, in which learning outcomes and instrumental and technical reasoning are highly emphasized. Discovery of 'self' was also the major premise in the students' reflection logs, in which a majority of them took their prevailing self-identity as a constant state to be verified in interaction with others in the fieldwork placement. Reflexivity is manifested in asking fundamental questions about assumptions generated by formal and practice theories; it addresses the multiple interrelations between power and knowledge, and acknowledges the inclusion of self in the process of knowledge creation in social work practice. Its realization in social work education requires the social work educators' reflexive examination of the dynamics that influence the construction of curriculum, which in turn construct our prospective social workers.

**Keywords:** social work placement, reflection, reflexivity



## Introduction

The field placement is one of the major components of social work education as well as a major determinant of the quality of social work education. However, review of the literature reveals that the majority of research on fieldwork education primarily focuses on the relationship between knowledge and practice or on issues in supervisory practice and learning outcomes. There has been very little scholarly attention paid to the analysis of the learning of students in social work field education (Noble, 1999).

Noble (1999) highlights the importance of research on field placement training, arguing that field placement teaching is an under-researched and neglected area in social work education. Fieldwork relies on supervisors who are not faculty staff and who are usually not consulted by the university in areas of curriculum development and scholarship enterprise. Field supervisors, therefore, are often left to their own devices when teaching and fostering professional skills, and making connections between theory and practice. Although research on field practice occasionally appears in the social work literature (Boswell, 1997; Doel *et al.*, 1996; Fook *et al.*, 1997, 2000; Yelloly and Henkel, 1995), there is widespread agreement that a systematic exploration of field teaching and learning is needed (Fook, 1996; Noble, 1999).

In order to develop a critical focus for research on fieldwork, one must concentrate on the interactive aspects of practice experiences and situations in the context of socio-political-economic power relations (Noble, 2001). With regard to student learning, a critical focus requires serious reflection on the influence of student interactions, their particular interpretations, behaviours and hidden assumptions in relations with clients, as well as the ways these attitudes affect, and are affected by, power relations (Fook, 1999; Giroux, 1990). Noble (2001) argues that fieldwork instructors should replace the traditional authoritarian method of instilling knowledge with an approach that encourages reflection upon the actual learning that takes place for students engaged in practice. In particular, the curriculum should be designed to highlight the students' growing experience in the 'professional world' (Fook *et al.*, 2000; Phillipson *et al.*, 1988). Such an approach would democratize student learning and celebrate differences. Focusing on students' learning from 'the inside' encourages students to speak from their own individual and collective positions (Giroux, 1990). A key aspect of this process, noted by Noble (2001), is to view students' knowledge in the context of their engagement with practice issues. This exposition of practice to reflection allows for inquiry, criticism, changes and accountability (Fook, 1999), and is imperative to a critical learning process.

Inspired by Noble's ideas and guided by a belief in the process of 'reflection' or 'reflective learning', we embarked on a qualitative study based on the reflective logs kept by social work students. Students were encouraged to apply critical reflection to the fieldwork experiences and to highlight their learning. Such reflections not only connect theory to practice, but also enable analysis of



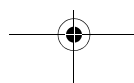
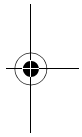
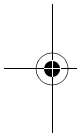
students' skill application and their responses to a range of complex and stressful situations (Fook *et al.*, 2000).

## Reflection and reflexivity in fieldwork practice

The significance of 'reflection' or 'reflective learning' in the field placement of social work students has always been underestimated. 'Reflection', in the context of learning, is 'a general term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experience in order for new understandings and appreciation' (Boud *et al.*, 1985, p. 19). As such, reflective learning is a process of interpretive discovery embedded in experience. According to Boyd and Fales (1983), it is a process of thinking about and exploring an issue, which is triggered by an experience. The aim of this deliberation is to make sense of, or find meaning in, the experience and to incorporate this experience into one's view of self and the world. The exploration of an experience to create meaning (reflection) inevitably focuses on something of central importance to the individual, which can engender learning and growth. This process invariably leads to increased self-awareness, increased sensitivity to the environment and a change in conceptual perspective. Potentially, such a process not only improves critical thinking skills, but also contributes to a growth in self-awareness and self-actualization (Maslow, 1979), and the development of new knowledge (Boyd and Fales, 1983).

Boyd and Fales (1983) distinguish six stages of the process of reflective learning: inner discomfort, identification of the concern, openness to new information, resolution, establishment of continuity, and the decision whether to take action. Ixer (1999) summarizes Dewey's (1910) five stages of reflection as follows: an awareness of a 'felt' problem, observation and refinement of the felt problem by experience, development of a hypothesis, the application of professional reasoning to the problem, and, finally, 'experimental corroboration'. A central premise of reflective learning is that knowledge is founded on the processing of experience. Schon (1987) conceives of social work professionals as 'reflective practitioners'. These practitioners create meaning by observing and analysing exemplary themes that arise in their case experiences, rather than by applying general principles to individual cases (Schon, 1991a, 1991b). In reflective practices, the practitioner is regarded as an artist (Schon, 1991a) who acknowledges ambivalence in scientific knowledge (Taylor and White, 2000) and adopts the 'knowledge as process' paradigm (Sheppard, 1995). The social work field placement—a major component of social work education and a rich context for reflective learning—places strong emphasis on the role of experience in professional development.

Notwithstanding, reflexivity has become a significant concept in recent decades to challenge complacency with the notion of reflection (D'Cruz *et al.*, 2006; Ferguson, 2001, 2003; Kondrat, 1999). This constantly expanding and widely discussed concept, arising from various streams of sociology (i.e. symbolic





interactionism, phenomenology and ethnography) and other theoretical disciplines, has gained increasing attention in social work literature. However, reflexivity is a complex concept. Many definitions of 'reflexivity' have been proposed (e.g. Bourdieu, Lash, Beck, Lawson) premised on the author's point of reference (Gouldner, 1970; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). 120

The French sociologist Bourdieu views reflexivity as an alternative conceptual framework for knowledge and experience (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). According to Bourdieu, reflexivity involves the systematic exploration of the 'unthought categories of thought which delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 10). Wacquant argues that Bourdieu's brand of reflexivity differs from others in three crucial ways: first, its primary target is not the individual analyst but the social and intellectual unconsciousness that is embedded in analytic tools and operations; second, it is a collective enterprise—not the individual burden of a sole academic; and third, it seeks to buttress the epistemological security of sociology (Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu and Wacquant maintain that a researcher simultaneously acts as 'an individual', a 'part of the social world' and a 'member of the intelligentsia' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). 125 130 135

In Beck's seminal discussion of reflexive modernization, he identifies the multiplicity of boundaries and rationalities in late modernity that necessitates immediate and indeterminate reflexes beyond traditional networks and interaction (Beck *et al.*, 2003). Lash (2003) also stresses the non-linear notion of reflexivity in late modernity. The first modern society, according to Lash (2003), conceives society as a linear system with stable structure, and the subject is constituted in consonance with a set of roles in a variety of institutions. Second modernity, however, presumes the existence of non-linear systems with characteristics of destabilization and uncertainties. The difference between reflectivity and reflexivity is hence portrayed by the break between the linear nature of first modernity and the non-linear nature of second modernity (Lash, 2003). 140 145

Furthermore, an individual's basic assumption of the philosophy of consciousness in the first modernity also constitutes the basic distinction of reflectivity from reflexivity (Lash, 2003). The legacy of individualism influences the direction of reflective practice and the locus for reflection is 'in' the individual, and its concern is more with enhancing one's awareness (Hugman, 2003). Reflexivity, according to Bleakley (1999), refers to 'an interrogation of the conditions under which, for example, notions of identity, such as "autonomy" and "personal agency", are constituted and accepted as valid, or are culturally legitimized' (p. 323). 150 155

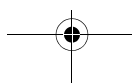
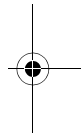
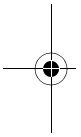
Contemporary social work practice is precisely the arena typically characterized by indeterminacy, uncertainty and non-linearity that demands attention to reflexivity. The purview of social work includes those facets of human affairs that are neither stable nor measurable. It is increasingly recognized that most of the human risks that social workers are expected to assess or manage 'are not subject to scientific evaluation in any quantified or probabilistic sense', but 160



are reliant on 'artistic and situated judgment' (Parton, 1998, p. 23). Growing scepticism about the possibility of identifying objective causes and of the availability of perfect knowledge on human behaviours fuels a new mentality of risk and uncertainty. With growing doubt about positive knowledge owned by professionals, the predictability and controllability of human order in social work come under cumulating query. Smith (2001) hence contends that social workers should 'abandon the spurious expectation that they can predict conditions and outcomes of risk', and 'embrace uncertainty and ambiguity and exploit the potential creativity' that uncertainty and ambiguity unleash (Smith, 2001, p. 290).

As the set of knowledge and skills for social work is increasingly recognized as situated locally in the milieu in which practitioners and service users interact, socially situated knowledge is reckoned as superior to the traditional notion of objective facts and scientific knowledge (Cooper, 2001). Appeals to surrender the professional's technical expertise is advocated by scholars like Schon (1983), in his assertion for a vision of professionals as agents who can 'reflect-in-action' and 'know-in-action' through co-operative enquiry with clients. Recognizing that professionals' technical expertise is embedded in a context of meaning, which was once constructed and may be reconstructed (Schon, 1983), professional enquiry should not be limited 'to a deliberation about means which depends on a prior agreement about ends', but 'keep means and ends separate' and defining them 'interactively as he frames a problematic situation' (Schon, 1983, p. 68). The hope to contain risk in the professional practice of social work thus lies on the existence of a 'discursive space' (Ferguson, 2001), where practices can be deliberated, negotiated and accounted for through a dynamic, on-going and reflexive process.

Reflection connotes the positivist attempt to distance social work practitioners from their experiences, in an attempt to obtain a more 'objective' view of their practice (D'Cruz *et al.*, 2006; Kondrat, 1999). Whilst critical reflectivity remains 'reflection-on-action' (D'Cruz *et al.*, 2006), reflexivity is identified with 'reflection-in-action' (Schon, 1983) that critically reviews the construction of professional practice and renews it. In the context of the social work profession, reflexivity is regarded as more than 'benign introspection'; it is a process of thinking 'about what we are doing' (Woolgar, 1988, p. 22)—a process in which 'we subject our own knowledge claims to critical analysis' (Taylor and White, 2000, p. 35). Reflexivity is achieved 'by social workers becoming aware of the dominant professional constructions influencing their practice' (White, 1997, p. 749). According to Sheppard (1998), the notion of reflexivity is based on a conception of social workers as active thinkers and social actors with a clear understanding of their role and purpose, and an awareness of the assumptions underlying the ways they 'make sense' of situations (p. 767). As such, reflexivity can be seen as the ability of social workers to critically review their day-to-day analysis and practice in order to reveal their own social, intellectual and professional values and assumptions, as well as their less conscious motivations. With a greater degree of reflexivity, social workers are able to achieve a more rigorous approach to professional practice.





## The conceptual framework

This paper uses a reflective–reflexive framework to map the learning experiences of social work students. The first dimension of this framework is reflection. 210 Reflection is essential to social work education and practice. To be reflective is to think about and explore issues of concern, to make sense of one’s experiences within knowledge boundaries, and to interpret one’s experience against one’s view of the self and the world. Areas for reflection include the personal 215 purview of individual values, beliefs, strengths and weaknesses, as well as the practice purview of professional values and ethics, strengths and limitations in practice, the roles social workers play and professional identity of the students. Reflection is the active attempt to generate generalizable knowledge about self and the profession, in dealing with the dynamic practice environment.

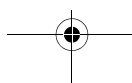
The second dimension of this paper’s framework is reflexivity. When students are reflexive, they are not interested simply in analysing what they have done and how they have proceeded within their knowledge boundary. They become part of the context with awareness of the way in which their interpretations are affected by the professional groups and dominant discourse. When students are reflexive about their profession, they are aware of the dominant 225 professional constructions influencing their practice. It becomes a critical process of ‘thinking about thinking’. During the process, practitioners ask fundamental questions about assumptions generated by formal and practice theories, address the multiple interrelations between power and knowledge, and acknowledge the inclusion of self in the process of knowledge creation (D’Cruz 230 *et al.*, 2006). In this way, reflexivity becomes a meta-reflection (Beck *et al.*, 2003) that introduces uncertainty to practice instead of maintaining consistency (D’Cruz *et al.*, 2006).

The reflective–reflexive framework was used to map the students’ reflective logs, in which both what was said and what was left unsaid are significant. The study aimed to explore how reflection occurs, to understand how students made sense of the interaction among the self, the professional knowledge claim, and the clients they served, and to chart the extent of reflexivity in their learning process. 235

## Methodology

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The study was triggered by the SARS outbreak in Hong Kong in 2003. The first phase of research was a survey of all students majoring in social work at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in the academic year 2002/03 ( $N = 114$ ). A quantitative data collection tool—a questionnaire—was used to measure the impact of the sense of risk engendered by the SARS crisis when the students 245 were in their fieldwork placement. The next phase was conducting four focus groups (with a total of twenty-three informants). Information was gathered on the participants’ experiences as social work interns during the SARS crisis,





the significant incidents they encountered, and how they interpreted their experiences. 250

To further understand how the students processed their fieldwork experience, we invited nine social work students to provide written logs of the critical incidents they encountered and their reflections on these incidents. Noble (2001) asked social work students in their final year of study to write a narrative about their placement experiences. He concluded that the use of a narrative encourages ways of thinking that are particularly suited to identifying the issues confronted by students in placement. Following Noble's methodology, we believe that student-centred logs provide teachers with a way of assisting students to develop critical reflective processes as part of the curriculum. 255

The group of social work students writing logs represented a good mix in terms of gender, year of study and grades. The logs were in the form of autobiographical stories provided by the students in written form. The tape-recorded interviews and the written logs provided by the students were then analysed to reveal emergent themes, by using the methods of qualitative data analyses (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990; Taylor and Bodgan, 1998). NVivo—a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software package—was employed for data coding and data reduction. 260 265

The discussion in this paper is mainly based on the data collected from the qualitative part of the study.

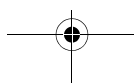
## Findings 270

### Discovery of self from emotionality in practice

The logs of the students reveal the prevalence of negative emotions such as distress, frustration, bewilderment, disappointment and fear during their fieldwork encounters. Problematic and disturbing events that gave rise to bewilderment and discomfort were often the antecedents of reflection. This reinforces Dewey's (1910) theory that problematic issues give rise to reflection. The disturbing events recorded by the students arose from their interaction with multifarious stakeholders in the fieldwork placement, including clients, other staff in the field unit and their field instructors: 275

In both placements, I have been identified by the field supervisors as having a reluctant attitude. I don't know why. I was afraid of talking to the seniors . . . I preferred to stay in the office—intending to avoid the sight of the seniors. In another community setting, I was required to cold call potential service users I have never met before . . . Every time I made such calls, I would feel frightened, wanting to escape from the feeling of rejection . . . From such experiences, I have to admit, though with reluctance, that I am fearful of failure. At a deeper level, I may not know how to cope with failure (Log-S4—a third-year student). 280 285

In the log of the student quoted above, discomforting experiences during his fieldwork placements engendered an introspective reflection on his selfhood. 290





Invariably, selfhood and self-awareness were common denominators in the students' cognitive recognition triggered by discomforting emotion during fieldwork. Enhanced self-awareness was often acknowledged by students as a major gain from the social work education process:

The most valuable lesson from studying social work is the chance for me to re-examine myself from the multifarious new perspectives the curriculum enables. I manage to confront the truest facet of myself, and allow the hidden weaknesses, limitations, and shortcomings to emerge gradually. From this brings growth in life (Log-S6—a third-year student). 295

Ostensibly, search for 'self' was the major premise of the students' reflection. However, insight on selfhood gained from reflecting on the emergence of a particular emotional response to a situation was largely limited to a positivist self awaiting discovery. How the 'self' was involved in the process of knowledge creation about the clients was seldom dealt with in the students' reflection logs. Neither was the dynamic interplay between emotion and cognition commonly addressed as a vehicle for the discovery of self. 300 305

### Inquiry in the face of value dilemma

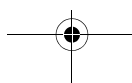
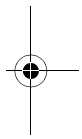
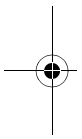
It was practice dilemmas encountered in fieldwork that engendered the social work students' awareness of their long-held belief. Very often, such practice dilemmas were also the catalyst that connected the students' personal self to their professional self as a prospective social worker: 310

According to my religious beliefs, there is a firm stand in moral issues such as pre-marital sex, euthanasia, homosexuality, media ethics, pornography, drugs, and gambling. I also abide by these religious ethics and values, and wish that the profession and discipline I engage in shared similar views. But I recognize that social work does not have a standard view on the above issues . . . in terms of the diversity it espouses (Log-S4—a third-year student). 315

Awareness of value dilemmas was also provoked by observed dissonance between their own authentic reaction and the normative professional behaviour in certain practice situations. Such identified dissonance was a catalyst to the students' cognitive recognition: 320

I saw the youngsters' rude behavior and dismissive attitude. They didn't have respect for people. I feel an immediate disgust for them. I have tried to get in touch with them. But their response made me feel uncomfortable, and humiliated. Social workers are also human beings, with our own feelings and emotions. I can truly feel the empathy and acceptance that other colleagues have towards them (the youngsters). Maybe, I am not one capable of empathy (Log-S2—a second-year student). 325

However, neither realization of the discrepancy between personal values and the professional values nor the acknowledged dissonance helped to engender further examination of either the normative professional principles or the 330







construction of their prevailing 'self'. The prevailing self-identity was taken as a constant state to be verified in the interaction with others in fieldwork placement. Realization of the discrepancy between personal values and the professional standpoint served merely to assert the 'objective' presence of the divergence. No further question was asked of the fundamental assumptions and social factors that have constructed the respective values.

### Formal theories and professional competence

Social work practice has always been described as a creative blending of knowledge, values and skills (Johnson and Yanca, 2001). Accordingly, the interaction between knowledge, skills and values in social work was a common theme in the students' logs. Practice competence was the students' prime area of concern. It was largely measured by the demonstration of professed skills and the application of classroom knowledge:

I used extinction and reinforcement in a social skill training group . . . . In reflection, I recognized that I missed the essence of behavioral modification . . . . Not only did I not help the client's problem, I engendered an unpleasant experience that could hamper her development. This was a violation of the humanistic principle of helping. I recognized that I must always be conscious of my own professional attitude and think carefully before acting (Log-S5—a second-year student).

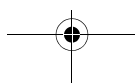
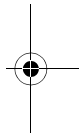
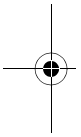
Reflections on professional competence were bounded by a circumscribed knowledge frame characterized by formal theories. Within the bounded knowledge frame, the underlying values and assumptions of these formal theories were rarely questioned. Similar bounded reflection was commonly identified when the students related to their practice competence.

One student, however, challenged the primary concern for theory and skill application in the practice learning process:

I have heard a client saying, 'I must be a bad guy from the fact that I am here [a hostel for boy]. Should social work be a job of classifying people? . . . . I have a very strong conviction—human beings cannot be a subject for analysis. Relationships between people should be authentic—there shouldn't be any skill that destroys authenticity. It is painful to calculate what skill to apply, what interpersonal impact to effect. It is not authenticity to me (Log-S7—a second-year student).

The critical challenge to the primacy of theory and skill application was concomitant to an assertion for the client's human agency, by her rejection to relegate the client to a classification label. Her emphasis on authenticity also denounced the use of skills as a substitute to the use of self in the helping process:

What I want to learn most is how to interact and get along with different people . . . . If we believe that social work is person-centered . . . if we still believe that people are equal and capable of mutual aid, learning to be a





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person is the most basic and important to a prospective social worker (Log-S7—a second-year student).

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Recognition and respect for human agency both in the clients and herself enabled a critical turn in addressing the dynamic personhood rather than sole emphasis on the static formal theories in the process of helping. Professional competence was hence defined as continual enhancement of the authentic self in interaction with the others, rather than by measurement against bounded knowledge frame.

Power relationship in practice and knowledge creation

The same student also challenged the notion of professionalism, when she realized the power dynamics in its construction:

Professionalism as such is just a tool of control . . . I think it is important to break through professionalism, so that we can remember that a social worker is not superior and saintly . . . Social work is a sharing of life . . . I can see that professionalism is a bounded frame for many social workers, determining their relationship with clients, nature of their work, and their ways of thinking . . . What makes professionalism offensive to me is not enough information and resources in order to help. But if in mastering knowledge and information we claim exclusive expertise, like legal professionals, saying to the clients that they knew nothing, this is really problematic (Log-S7—a second-year student).

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Concomitant to such critical stance towards the construction of social work professionalism was a realization of the constructionist nature of mainstream social values and practices:

Though I hate analyzing people, I become more apt to analysis myself . . . The society constituted of numerous individual selves. I came to understand how society is socially constructed by the powerful people with the assistance of social institutions, values and habitual ways of doing things (Log-S7—a second-year student).

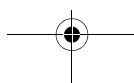
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Premised on a realization of the power dynamics in social relationships, the student was critical of the use of formal theories and power in the helping process of social work:

Applying behavioral modification to change the behaviors of a group of 'deviant youth' could not at all change their outlook on life. The workers were using their power to suppress the youngsters' behaviors. Such continual suppression could one day burst into disaster (Log-S7—a second-year student).

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Such interrogation of power in understanding social and professional practices is a manifestation of the student's reflexivity in her role as a prospective social worker. However, there was no evidence in the reflective logs of other students'





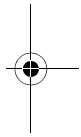
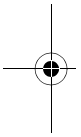
similar overt challenge to the power relationship implicit in social and professional relationships. 415

## Discussion

Although disturbing events pose challenges and trigger a sense of inner discomfort, disturbing experiences are also the necessary catalysts of reflective processes. When students engaged in fieldwork encounter a disturbing event, it acts as a challenge, the resolution of which provides students with alternative ways to interpret their experience, and critically examine their values, ways of acting and assumptions. The experience of the students fits within the framework of reflective learning (Gould and Tayler, 1996; Sheppard and Ryan, 2003), a central premise of which is the idea that knowledge is founded on experience. Confronted with a disturbing event, students undergo struggles that help them derive meaning from the experience, transforming experience into learning and reconceiving ideas of good practice (Sheppard *et al.*, 2000). The finding of this study is consistent with that of our other study: direct exposure to risk or uncertainty is, in fact, a very positive experience in terms of its impact on life and professional attitudes (Lam *et al.*, 2005). 420 425 430

Students' distress regarding their professional competence is worth contemplating. The undue concern with knowledge and skills application reveals the dominant influence of scientism and competence-based practice in social work, in which learning outcomes and instrumental and technical reasoning are highly emphasized. However, as Ixer (1999) observes, the nature of critical reflection and reflexivity does not fit the competence-based social work training model. Clift *et al.* (1990), in a review of social work training over the past twenty years, conclude that social work training has become so restricted by technocratic processes of measuring outcome that we miss the point of reflection. Our existing curriculum structure, in compliance with technocratic demands, fails to enable students to engage in activities which encourage the critical appraisal of knowledge. The paradigm for reflective practice is supposed to go beyond the mere transmission of knowledge and technical rational practices, to enable rigorous critical appraisals and foster an increased awareness of socially situated relationships with their clients (Sheppard, 1998)—allowing social work students to become conscious and critical thinkers. 435 440 445

Search for 'self' was the major premise of the students' reflection. The legacy of individualism (Bleakley, 1999) and the learning and teaching goal of social work field placement do account for this phenomenon. Influenced by the notion of experiential learning, an explicit objective of social work field placement is to allow emerging experience to influence the growing professional self. In the field manual of our undergraduate programme, the very first objective for field placement is 'to develop self-awareness, self-acceptance and critical thinking potentials so that students can make disciplined and effective use of self in the helping process' (Social Work Department, 2003). With this 450 455





precise goal, it becomes comprehensible why our student informants devoted so much attention to their selfhood. However, reflective practice can be limited if it becomes 'self-focused'. As reminded by Bleakley (1999), when we get more sophisticated with narcissistic pondering, we may be less sensitive to the world around us and be less able to discriminate and tolerate 'otherness' and 'difference', making reflection 'a symptom rather than a virtue' (p. 321). 460

The question remains: how can we facilitate students to become reflexive social workers who can go 'beyond the personal' (Scott and Usher, 1996) to the 'embedding of act in a context' (Bleakely, 1999, p. 323)? As social work educators, we must ask: why do our students suspend their reflexivity? What are the contexts in which social work students are likely to move into a reflexive state? How can our curriculum better facilitate students' reflexive practice in their field placement? Berger and Luckmann (1971) point out that once an activity follows a pattern, the activity is 'habitualized' and much is taken for granted—routinized actions result in 'unreflexive' practice. Reflexivity begins with the availability of individuals and institutions to reflect upon their own circumstances (Giddens, 1991), to interpret the effects of discursive practices embedded in language and culture, and to start the 'thinking about thinking' process (Bleakley, 1999). Our fundamental belief is that all individual social workers possess reflexive abilities and a capacity for rigorous critical appraisal. We share Bleakley's (1999) notion that reflectivity practice is not a learned technique, but should be grounded in an aesthetic rather than a functional domain. However, the current emphasis on evidence-based practice (Sheldon and Macdonald, 1999) and knowledge-based practice (Fisher, 1997), which stresses the value of formal or proven knowledge, might not be compatible with the ideology of reflexive practices. Facilitating students' attempts to reconceive their practice experiences, to analyse their own thought process, to engage with the world with sensitivity to difference, to recognize the ways in which the cognitive process is socially, historically and politically influenced, and to look past the constraints of the dominant professional constructions, are pathways for heading towards the journey of reflexivity. 470 475 480 485

The present study has several recommendations for social work education and practice. Students' experiences in placement are highly individual. Although we understand that the fieldwork experience provides students with an opportunity to integrate 'knowing' and 'doing' (Noble, 1999), a systematic exploration of this learning process is still wanting. This exploratory study is one of the few studies that use students' logs as a means to help students reflect on and rethink their fieldwork experiences. The study results alert us to the importance of active research in field learning. As Schon pointed out in an early work (Argyris and Schon, 1974), there must be constant feedback between the classroom and the field to allow students to see the clear link between theory and practice. 490 495

The value of placement learning increases with the availability of a reflexive process, by which the knowledge–practice relationship in social work activity is critically explored (Noble, 2001; Schon, 1987). In social work education, 500

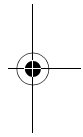
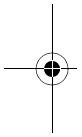


developing reflexivity during the field placement means focusing on the interactive aspects of practice experiences and situations in the context of power relationships (Fook, 1999). With regard to student learning, reflexivity offers a critical stance towards the status quo, engendering the rethinking on how meanings and practices are discursively constructed, amidst the influence of power on human interactions, and the effects of particular behaviours, interpretations and hidden assumptions when working with clients. In order to help our students employ their reflection critically, our curriculum should be so designed to take into account the interplay between the students' experiences and the dynamic context in which their experiences are embedded, and to embrace uncertainty and ambiguity in the teaching process. The most importantly of all, we as social work educators should reflexively examine the dynamics that influence the construction of the curriculum, which, in turn, constructs our prospective social workers.

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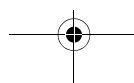
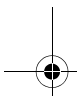
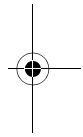
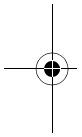
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