A PROPOSAL FOR INQUIRY OF NETWORK AND CHALLENGE-BASED LEARNING IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

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Abstract

Today's welfare system faces a variety of social challenges in terms of social vulnerability, inequality and the presence of segregated and parallel societies. Within this complexity, the professional practitioner meets opportunities for action, institutional frameworks, and the role of higher education as a future social innovator. The objective of this paper is to suggest an inquiry concerning how social work students form their conception on the complexity of every-day social work practice and professional expertise. The focus is to investigate social work students' process and formation of knowledge regarding challenge based learning (CBL). Methodologically the examination will be based on multi-method data triangulation design. In conclusion this paper suggests the use of socio-ecological and social learning theory to develop more dynamic teaching models to enhance the understanding of the challenging pathways linking social structures in development of students' professional self.
KEY WORDS: higher education, collaboration, health and welfare services, social pedagogy and social work

Anotacija

Šiandienos gerovės sistemai kyla naujų iššūkių dėl socialinio pažeidžiamumo, nelygybės ir visuomenės segregacijos. Šioje sudėtingoje situacijoje socialiniams darbuotojams profesionalams tenka užsiimti nauja veikla, plėtoti tarpinstitucinius tinklus ir orientuotis į aukštąjį mokslą, kaip ateities socialinių inovacijų variklį. Straipsnyje siekiama aktualizuoti tyrimo, aprėpiančio socialinio darbo studentų kasdienės socialinio darbo praktikos ir profesinės patirties kompleksiškumo suvokimą, poreikį. Dėmesys sutelkiamas į socialinio darbo studentų žinių formavimosi procesą, taikant iššūkiais pagrįstą mokymąsi. Metodologiškai toks tyrimas būtų pagrįstas įvairiais metodais, gautų duomenų trianguliacija. Siūloma taikyti socioekologines ir socialinio išmokimo teorijas, kurti dinamiškus mokymo metodus, kurie padėtų studentams suprasti sudėtingas socialinių struktūrų sąsajas, siekiant profesinio tapatumo.
PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: aukštasis mokslas, bendradarbiavimas, sveikatos ir socialinės paslaugos, socialinė pedagogika, socialinis darbas.

Introduction

Those who provide social services often encounter challenges, which many professional practitioners in the social services and healthcare sector consider to be overpowering (Lauri, 2016). Not least among these challenges are the obvious gaps regarding different approaches to knowledge, education and learning, and the outcome this has on the socially distressed (Blom and Morén, 2010). Teaching

processes in formal education often build on instructional didactics (Dennison, Gruber and Vrbsky, 2010), and there is a need to discuss teaching and education as a social activity, often integrated in the academies with theoretical subjects and in the professional sphere with daily work (Ellström, Ekholm and Ellström, 2008; Wenger, 2000).

Research shows that knowledge is created in favourable learning environments, through action, collaboration, judgment and reflection (Ellström Ekholm and Ellström, 2008; Haraway, 1988; Jovchelovitch, 2007). The potential of self-learning and the ability to reflect has garnered great attention within adult education theory (see, e.g., Schön, 1983). Alm (2015) uses the concept of isomorphism, corresponding, in everyday terms, to adaptation and interpretation, to discuss professional traditions. As a result of the increased professionalization, both educational and social service activities can be understood on the basis of normative isomorphism and the social matrix of collective knowledge (Alm, 2015; Regehr, 2013; Wenger, 2000). This means that the activities, through similar education and a common network, risk limiting and standardising the approach and become an object for narrow knowledge management, operating within predefined frameworks. However, academic pedagogic activity, from a postmodernist perspective, is not only considered as a source of knowledge, but also as the origins of developing our view of knowledge (Göppner and Hämäläinen, 2007; Jovchelovitch, 2007). As a result, some social work scholarships efforts focus on understanding the impact current educational policies (Regehr, 2013), and curriculum management have on student's success in academic engagement (Cartney, 2010; Drisko, 2014). Other address rules structuring the interaction between professionals and clients (Englander and Folkesson, 2014), understanding of a broader cultural norm that view the professional as an authority figure (Blom and Morén, 2010), or employ counter-narrative to "story" a case (Kohler Reissman and Quinney, 2015).

There are variety of conditions and reactions under which students development of professional role may be challenging. However, limited information is available on social work students' perceptions regarding factors they find as challenging when confronting every day social work field practice and how they manage challenges in their professional development. Consequently, the current project aims to draw attention to different aspects of knowledge forms in order to obtain a basis for the interpretation for challenge-based learning (CBL) that may be important for social work students' formation of professional role growth. Students' operational learning also known as modelling in complex realities such as social work and social pedagogy field of practice, call for selective reinforcement in development of knowledge from mastering elementary skills in operant level to contingency shaping in meta-cognitive level (Blom and Morén, 2010; Dychawy

Rosner, 2018; Wenger, 2000). From this perspective, CBL is in this research understood grounded in socio-ecological and social learning theory where students learning can be conceptualised as a continuum through which they acquire varying knowledge forms repertoires. Thus, university programs preparing students for social work have the very delicate task to make the world outside "the university walls" understandable for the students and workable for pedagogic management. The students are going through a process of appropriating knowledge and gain personal development. The student is the active subject in the process but is also heavily influenced by external factors. The social learning theory perspective on knowledge development has been proposed as a viable alternative to traditional operant and observational learning (Dychawy Rosner, 2018; Thyer and Myers, 1998; Witkin, 2014). Consequently, the research suggested here is based on a constructivist and contextual foundation (Jovchelovitch, 2007), where a practical activity in the classroom and knowledge creation in everyday situations is opened up and supplemented with a scientific viewpoint. It is not possible in this article to sum up the research linked to social work or social pedagogy education. The aims is rather to propose some idea on empirical framework by suggesting design and ways of study social work students development of various knowledge forms and awareness of professional self on the basis of their field study, conversations with social work practitioners and formal educational curriculum.

Some of the central questions that partially define this suggested research and form an intellectual framework for the study design are:

- How does the student form an understanding of the complex professional reality they meet during their field studies education?
- How is the learning process shaped as the student develop their understanding of a reflective practitioner? What factors can be significant for overcoming challenge-based learning process?
- How can this newly acquired knowledge affect didactics in a challenge-based learning context?

1. The conceptual foundations

Various combined conditions such as knowledge development and contextual practice perspective importance for learning process and contextual practice perspectives are critical to address in forming knowledge for complex social realities. It would be inappropriate here to give a comprehensive account of the ongoing debate concerning suitable methodological and philosophical viewpoints to take in understanding human learning and development of various knowledge forms. The international literature reflects considerable variation on the understanding

and meaning of knowledge and learning process concepts. However, in preparing this study we found some general points in recognition of different underlying epistemologies in what is perceived to be the nature of knowledge. Some perspectives may be connected to the interpretative approaches regarding knowledge development, identified as qualitative (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Further, other ways seek to describe specific hypothesis and decode differential distribution of categorical frameworks of the phenomenon under investigation and are identified as quantitative in nature (Burnaford, 2001; Baumann, 1996; Robson, 2002).

Yet another important area for inquiring knowledge development concerns the appropriate encounter of challenges that practitioners meet in their every-day practice. The growth of effective learning progression plays an important role in social work education programmes and helping professionals to remain in the profession (Alm, 2015; Lauri, 2016). The most narrowly adapted generic practice perspective in social work has been socio-ecological systems perspectives (Germain, 1991; Thyer and Myers, 1998). Socio-ecological perspectives has been applied in community settings to social problems that traditionally have been the concern of social workers and social pedagogues (Dychawy Rosner, 2016; Witkin, 2014). These perspectives, beyond the many domain-specific clinical theories available to practitioners, may be adopted by social workers to comprehend the client-in-situation. Thyer and Myers (1998) note that most fundamental mechanism in these perspectives to learning is the one of human beings in their environment being influenced by mutual adaptation. Payne (1997) reason for the close parallels of socio-ecological factors as "life model" of social work practice.

Educational programs at any level of the educational system are not only transmitters of knowledge as pure facts, they instil moral conduct and social order (Bernstein 2000).That is that social work students are not only supposed to learn facts they should also be socialised into the "correct way" to behave and meet the recipients of social services. Teachers, policy makers and researchers in the educational area should focus on the formal as well as the hidden curricula to reveal the forces behind the socialisation of students. Bernstein (ibid.) denotes the hidden forces *symbolic control* meaning that "something" is surrounding us, an invisible regulation, forcing us to behave and think in a certain direction. Education through formal school systems is in this view the instrument for the transmission of symbolic control. What is transferred to students in the process of symbolic control? The answers are, according to Bernstein (ibid.), societal power relations and established discourses. There are several external circumstances, aspects of the symbolic control that influence the social work curriculum, such as for example: how social work / social pedagogy as a tradition is conceived; how social welfare is spread to citizens (the socio-political context) and the impact of processes of professiona-

lization. The different aspects are selected because they are considered as significant objects of transformation into the curriculum. When study plans, textbooks, lectures, field studies and all other curricular activities are constructed, at different levels of universities and colleges, discourses have been the subject of a process of filtering. Bernstein (2000) calls this transformational process *recontextualisation.* The tool that is put in action in fulfilling the transformation is called the *pedagogic device*. The university's educational program is the medium for the transmission of skills, values and professional traits. The challenges of today's society need the analytical and autonomous social worker / social pedagogue, who is able to communicate and reflect accordingly to his/hers operant practice. The challenges give that the reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983) should be the goal for activities in educational programs.

2. Method

The study's design builds upon an explorative multi-method data triangulation design (Robson, 2002). Consequently, quantitative studies proving associations between phenomena will be combined with qualitative examination (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Robson, 2002) while identifying the mechanism and pathways between students' perception of demanding situations in the field, their operant learning and their knowledge development at the meta-cognitive level. Accordingly to Fougner (2013) we share the view that both qualitative and quantitative methods are appropriate to the kind of research questions asking outcomes and trying to understand both individual and group experiences of learning.

Data collection. The study suggested is based on convenience sample. Consequently, a simultaneous study is planned, using the same design, to be conducted on Social Work Bachelor Programmes at both Warsaw University and at Klaipeda University. We see this as an important link in being able to validate and generalise the results, as well as to compare the obtained empiric's data material between these three studies.

Data collection is concentrated into three data collection periods. The first instance will be (in Swedish settings) at the beginning of the course in semester 4 named T1 and second measurement T2 at the end of the course, and further T3 during the following semester. The last data collection period will be around nine or twelve months after the first measurement. This setup is based on the premise that both individual and group levels are important to study. A key component of assessment in this research are on-going learning activities in the social work course, seat reading, monitoring discussions during tutoring, supervision, seminars and students reflective writings. Table 1 presents an overall plan for data collection and analysis disposition in this research.

Table. 1. Overall plan for data collection and analysis disposition

Sub-studies	Empirical basis	Data collection periods time			Data analysis
Student's individual field studies	Documentation of individual reflections and impressions of meetings with professional practitioners	At the start of the course – T1	At the end of the course – T2	Following semester – T3	Text analysis – Explicit and thematic content analysis
Group work upon sharing knowledge, reflection and case information from the gained filed experiences	Documentation of focus group interviews, seminars, tutoring and field studies rapports		T2	T3	Case analysis and discourse analysis with focus on change processes at group level. Analysis of written and verbal group-presentations and documentations
Student's individual reflection written around one's own learning process as a whole	Documentation of students reflective writings Documentation of individual self-administered measurement of attained knowledge	T1	T2	T3	Qualitative and quantitative analysis of statements with focus on reproductive respective transformative learning at both group and individual level

The authors-developed self-administered survey instrument inspired by the course curricula (Malmö University, 2018), Drisko (2014) and assessment earlier established within gerontological social work by Galambos, Curl and Woodbury (2014), was completed to collect data on students perception of general social work knowledge attainment. The questionnaire included 10 Likert-type statements that participants rated on 1–4 scale from 1 strongly disagree to 4 strongly

agree. Additionally, two open – ended questions was constructed for participant to expand upon topics related to their perceptions of challenges that practitioners meet in their day-to day work practice and about challenges perceived in their own learning process and knowledge development (see Appendix 1).

According to the Swedish proposal, the informants will comprise those students who take part in the fourth semester of the social work programme (n = approx. 90 people in the Swedish study). Participant numbers for our partner universities in Warsaw, Poland and Klaipeda University, Lithuania with a total of around 90 students. The Swedish empiric base is collected in the fourth semester of bachelor Social Work Programme. The course aims to encourage students to develop knowledge about social problems and living conditions from a lifecycle and diversity perspective as well as professional knowledge and skills in terms of interventions, prevention and evidence-based social work. Furthermore, the course aims to enable students to develop their personal and professional skills. Follow-up data is collected in the fifth semester, by which time the course aims to enable students to develop the deeper knowledge, skills and approaches which professional social work demands. This course programme involves work placement training and teaching with feedback on both theory and practice.

The research proposal was developed through much debate and scrutiny among the authors, students and carer reference group, before being subject to the full ethical approval process in compliance with policies and procedures within the Malmö University. Consequently, the study is conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines for social scientific research (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017). Participants are informed, at the very start of the study's aim, that participation is voluntary and can be stopped any time, and that they will remain anonymous. Neither participation nor lack of participation have any influence on either student' scourse grade or opportunities to receive teaching.

At present, the project has implemented planning dialogues with partners locally and internationally through telephone besides physical meetings and established relevant contacts in addition to build reference groups. Close collaboration between international partners is considered to ensure deeper external perspectives. This is conducted a cross municipally authorities, deeper discussions with students on their perceptions and learning process combined with international partners. A physical meeting with international partners has been preliminarily scheduled for year 2017, 2018 and 2019 at Malmö, Warszawa and Klaipeda University. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss the study's design, methodology, implementation and joint application for research findings in general. The following meetings are planned with the purpose being to discuss implementation and methodological considerations for data collection, analysis and dissemination of findings.

3. Challenge-based learning

The discerned patterns of socio-ecological social learning scheme regarding teaching and knowledge development in a classroom is considered to transform the lived social work education curriculum. For many teachers their curriculum is shaped by their research. This study's problem area is, concisely, that there seems to be a gap between educational intentions, professional practice and the students' abilities to face professional challenges. Lave and Wenger (1991) highlight the importance of a shared vision and mind set in order to make sense of what they call "community of practice". It is recognised in this research, that knowledge can be considered as a social and cultural phenomenon. The subjectivist tradition of thought emphasises the fact that our social world cannot merely be explained on the basis of one single theory.

In an attempt to understand CBL and explain the studied context, we intend to use multidimensional theory formation such as social science, pedagogy and social pedagogy rather than strictly confining ourselves to narrow academic subjects. In its pedagogical and didactic approach, the CBL project's implementation is based on Dewey's problem-solving and experimental knowledge transformation method (se e.g., Bernstein, 2000; Lindsay, 2015; Witkin, 2014). Knowledge and its contents are discovered and explored by the students in an external world outside the classroom situation. The information is processed reflectively through social interaction in interview situations, by practitioners sharing the knowledge they apply in their daily work as well as through teachers' guidance and seminars where knowledge is primarily transformed through the transfer of experiences and reflective dialogue. The shared study object here becomes the educational reality, the ongoing learning process which is investigated in this context with different types of knowledge, with their pre-existing objects and goals (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This means that methods, objects and goals must be compatible, as no single method is sufficient for the various detailed social contexts (Thyer and Myers, 1998). This premise builds upon the idea that knowledge is formed in a circular process when material and cultural conditions outside the academy are transferred into an educational context. In an academic environment, new knowledge is produced on the basis of professional experiences, which, in turn, can give rise to newly produced generalised knowledge and to developing professional practice. This transformation of forms of knowledge between external and internal contexts is referred to by Bernstein (2000) as a re-contextualising process.

4. Discussion

It seems clear that new knowledge, of different kinds, must be provided to people in both education and work in order for them to be equipped to handle the ever-increasing challenges of professional life. The most interesting of these, from a pedagogical perspective, is the involvement of students in the exploration and development of the change chain regarding CBL formation of knowledge. The student becomes a central player, which implies a significant shifting of boundaries, as it becomes the student parties who dictate the direction of the project while simultaneously standing outside it. In the context of implementing the project, it is the students' knowledge experience and the didactic application of the students' learning processes that are in focus. You could thus say that the students' core position in their knowledge creation challenges the traditional power structures of learning processes in general, and, more specifically, of fact finding. The challenge means that classroom learning is moved outside of the academic organisation, despite being a creation of that organisation itself. We can also postulate that the project model constitutes an excellent example of the self-control and self-discipline which forms the foundation for the development of *Communities of practice* (Lave and Wenger, 1991) from interests that are actually distanced from the existing *communities*, i.e. activities.

Implementation of the course's intentions can thus be regarded as a planned change and learning process than not only involves changing thoughts and beliefs but as a process which, according to Schön (1983) implies a challenge for the individual student to develop into a "reflective practitioner". We understand this challenge in students' process of learning as an interplay between the social system consisting partly of social relations and partly a meaningful system, i.e. a network of discourses in a social work career. In this sense, the course, classroom and field of social practice becomes an arena for the development of the students' reflective abilities and a development process that challenges the students' established discourses e.g., around power schemes, intersectionality and ideas about direct contact with clients and the professional situation, as described by Lipsky (1980) in the term "street-level bureaucracy". Dialogue and reflection thus appear as important for learning in an ongoing cognitive restructuring and the creation of meaning. Giddens (1984) highlights in his structuration theory that routine and reproduction of the social life form the basis of our daily practice. Other researchers also emphasise that social life is fundamentally structured, but that it can also be understood as a continuum between structural reproductive and structural transformative practice (see, e.g., Lewin, 1951 or Hays, 1994). The process, as a cognitive restructuring in which the student learns new thinking patterns and approaches, that is cognitive

redefinition, can therefore be understood as a model for change through a vast process of unfreezing – moving and changing – and opened for new perspectives. Further, in an educational context, the framework drown from Sweden, Poland and Lithuania social work practice may stimulate knowledge development in the globalised academy and build evidence and theory for new practice. This international collaboration and sharing of learning process and knowledge development form widening of existing normative isomorfism (Alm, 2015) to a wider matrix of social work knowledge collective and social service adaptation.

In summary, this article has identified that there are significant benefits encompassing partnership locally in practice context and internationally in educational social work programmes. This article explore how research design could provide complimentary sites of learning regarding students' undergraduate social work module. A multi-method approach offers a wider knowledge base from the field and unique opportunities of insights challenge based learning. Through the teaching and learning approaches used in CBL, the involvement of practice partners will possibly develop critical-reflective skills of students by the relevance to real world practice. The teacher may researchers' deepen their knowledge base and capacity in professional expertise by dynamics inherent in the role of both teacher, tutor and the researcher. The practice of social work and social pedagogy involves a wide variety of intervention domains regarding social issues at individual-community and society level. Highlighting the process of how to conduct learning and challenge based issues in these complexities may be a positive contribution to pedagogical methodology, learning process of students and curriculum development of the educational programmes.

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Appendix – CBL questionnaire

Name …………………………………………………………………….

How old are you?

19-24	25-30	31-40	41-50	51-60

I experience that…..

Indicate a box you think is corresponding to your opinion. Please weight 1 – 4 according to the following:

1 = none or I have large shortcomings of knowledge in the field (I cannot)

2 = I have some kind of knowledge (partly)

3 = I have somewhat comprehensive knowledge in the field

4 = I have great knowledge in the field

	1	2	3	4
1. I have knowledge and I can give an account of social problems and identify vulnerable groups and contexts and how patterns of categorisation have implications for humans.				
2. I have insights about and I can problematize based on the contexts in which social work is operating				
3. I have knowledge about the application of a critical approach to social problems and the theories about social pedagogy relevant for social work.				
4. I have knowledge about and can apply various theories of importance for diversities and transcultural encounters in social work practice.				
5. I have knowledge about inter professional cooperation and collaboration between authorities, NGO:s and user organisations.				
6. I have knowledge about and can observe clients´ needs of assistance.				
7. I have knowledge about and can identify scope of practices for interventions in a lifelong perspective.				
8. I have knowledge about and can apply various interventions in social work practice.				
9. I have knowledge about and can identify shortcomings in scope of practices as well as in holistic perspectives and hindrances in the social work with clients.				
10. I have knowledge about and can include the client in the planning and the implementation of the assistance.				
11. Challenges for social work practice according to me are:				
12. Challenges for my learning are:				
13. Additional comments …				