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Student, practitioner, or both? Separation and integration of identities in professional social care education

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This paper presents and discusses some of the findings from a qualitative study of identities in work-related learners. The theoretical framework of structural symbolic interactionism is outlined and the two identities of interest, that of student and practitioner discussed. The aim of professional education is viewed as enabling the practitioner to deal with ambiguity and change through critical examination of work practices and location of these within theoretical frameworks. It is argued that for knowledge and behaviour to transfer to the work setting the student and worker identities need to be integrated rather than kept separate. Factors identified as influencing the integration and separation of the social identities of student and social care practitioner are discussed.

Keywords: Higher education; adult learning; reflection; assessment; students; professional development; symbolic interactionism; social identity; social care practitioner.

Context

Ireland in the early 21st century is a country where education is valued, particularly for its contribution to economic growth (Dunne, 2002; Share *et al.*, 2007). Dunne (2002) links the commencement of view that education has the function of "promoting the kinds of knowledge and talent that would create a skilled workforce" (p.69) to the industrialisation policy of the 1960s. Statistics show continuous increases in the educational attainment of the Irish population (e.g. OECD, 2007; O'Connell *et al.*, 2006). Also there is been a steady increase in the number of occupations in Ireland that are becoming qualification driven (Heraty *et al.* 2000), and social care work is one of them, linked to its drive for professional status.

Possession of a recognised educational credential is considered central to professional status (Humphreys, 2000; Beker, 2001). Back in 1970, the *Reformatory and Industrial Schools Systems Report* alluded to a process of professionalisation for residential child care through its emphasis on training of staff in the context of professional competence. Three of the thirteen recommendations refer to the necessity of having staff "fully trained in the aspects of Child Care" (p.6). The report also suggests that the "provision of trained staff should take precedence over any other recommendation" (p.14). Despite in-service courses in social care practice being in existence for practitioners in academic institutions in Ireland since 1971 (Richardson, 1996), in 2003, Clarke estimated about 45% of social care practitioners were unqualified. Since 2001 the salary scales of new social care practitioners in the areas of residential child care and intellectual disability have been tied to the possession of qualifications (Hanafin, 2001). Also the forthcoming registration of social care work (Health and Social Care Professionals Act, 2005) has created an increasing drive for unqualified practitioners in the sector to enter third level education to obtain the necessary degree qualification. Thus this research was conducted in a broad social setting where third level education is valued and associated with economic success. In addition, as in the United Kingdom (e.g. Heron and Chakrabarti, 2002a; Milligan *et al.,* 2003), in Ireland status differences between social care practitioners and social workers (Norton, 1999) and the formers' dissatisfaction with how their work is perceived (Williams and Lalor, 2000) are reported, contributing towards a drive for professionalisation of social care in Ireland.

Theoretical Framework – Symbolic Interactionism

Breakwell (1986) suggests that, while the term identity is used as if it were straightforward it is quite the opposite. In particular the replacement of modernist concepts of identity by late or

post-modernist concepts is seen as problematic (Bendle, 2002). Due to people now living in multiple realities, each with their own expectations and demands (Gergen, 2000) the modernist view that healthy functioning in adulthood is best achieved with an integrated and consistent identity is argued to be no longer viable. However the continuous construction of multiple and not necessarily consistent identities (Gergen in Sanoff 1991; Burr 1995) results in identity becoming "an elastic category that can be made to accommodate whatever requirements the overall argument demands of it" leaving us "without a rationale for talking about identities at all" (Bendle, 2002 p.12). Thus to study identity a model that allows for change and stability, examination of social contexts on identity formation and change, coherence and fragmentation, as well as accounting for the relationship between identity and behaviour is required. This is provided by the structural symbolic interactionist view.

This view of identity locates role interpretation and identity formation within the social structures in which individuals live and behave, thus providing a structure in which both the micro structures of the educational institution and workplace as well as the macro structures (Musolf, 1992), such as societal views of education and professionalisation in social care can be examined. The concepts of self and identity are distinguished by the social nature of identity with the self conceptualised as an assortment of identities each "associated with particular interactional settings or roles" (Burke and Tully, 1977 p.883).

Social identities are developed from the roles we occupy in society and are formed when one is "cast in the shape of a social object by the acknowledgement of […] participation or membership in social relations" (Stone 1962 p.93). A role is defined as a viewpoint from which behaviour is constructed (Hewitt 2003). When assigned a role in a social structure the role carries with it definitions and expectations of behaviour, which are

transmitted to the individual by the behaviour of those they interact with. Individuals interpret the meaning of the role using socially defined shared meanings and, if they identify with those meanings, begin to view themselves in terms of the same meanings (Burke and Tully 1977), thereby forming a social identity.

However the individual is seen as being able to influence societally defined meanings of roles through making changes to social arrangements to achieve consistency between their interpretation of the role and pre-existing identities (Burke and Stets 1999; Stets and Burke 2000). Stryker and Serpe (1982) demonstrate how existing student identities initially guide the expression of behaviour in a new learning environment but when the social structure and interactions of the new environment do not validate these identities they are adjusted and changed. Thus individual agency and social structures interact to create and recreate social identities.

The two social identities focused on here are those of student and social care worker. These are seen as located within and affected by the micro and macro social contexts.

Student Identity

To succeed in an educational setting the new student must create a viable student or learner identity, developed from their interpretation of the role of the student through interaction with others in the educational environment. Collier (2000) found that the new college student initially uses his or her identity as a student internalised from previous experiences of education, then adjusts this to align with the role of the student as interpreted through interactions in the new setting. Prior experiences of education are documented as affecting

the initial student identity, particularly when these have been negative (e.g. Crossan *et al.*, 2003; Johnson and Merrill, 2004; Haggis, 2004) leading to tentative engagement and even hostility. Behaviour of peers and staff in the college setting can impact on available interpretations of the role of student, for example lecturing styles and assessment techniques. Interpretations of the role of student and thus the identity formed in relation to it is found to change as the student becomes more confident in the new situation. Goffman (1961) refers to a period of secondary adjustment where the individuals become more confident and begin to 'bend the rules' and "manipulate the system to their advantage" (Merrill, 1999 p.132). However Merrill (1999) also reports variation among her female participants regarding the extent to which they thought students should fit into the institution's schedule as opposed to the schedule being adjusted to fit with the lives of mature students, indicating different views of the role of the student.

Professional Identity and Professional Practice

Schein (1978) sees professional identity as the principles, intentions, characteristics and experiences by which an individual defines him or herself in a professional role. Through acting in a particular role, the individual selectively acquires "the values and attitudes, the interests, skills and knowledge" of the professional group (Clouder, 2003 p.213). This occurs over time (Schein, 1978). Ibarra (1999) suggests that transitions in the workplace result in a renegotiation of the professional's identity so it is reasonable to suggest that taking part in a programme of professional education can result in a similar renegotiation.

Lynton (1996 p.13) presents the view, that in many areas of professional practice, "reality is messy, problems are not well defined, and […] there exists in most situations a variety of options, each involving trade-offs among competing goals and values." Lynton's

view is resonated in discussions of health and social care professions (e.g. Parton 2003; Yielder 2004), where professional practice is presented as being complex and ambiguous, requiring practitioner skills of critical thinking and reflection as it involves a "multiplicity of possible perspectives, depending on personal circumstances, particular dynamics and events and sources of support" (Cameron, 2004 p.145).

Methodology

As the aim of the research is to explore how participants interpret the roles of student and social care practitioner, as well as the interaction between identities formed from these roles, the data generated needs to focus on how participants describe, interpret and understand the meanings of the experience of being students and social care practitioners. A qualitative approach is taken as it "implies a direct concern with experience as it is 'lived' or 'felt' or 'undergone'" (Sherman and Webb, 1988 p.7) and allows the researcher to "develop an understanding of how the world is constructed" for participants (McLeod, 2001 p.2).

The theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism and the literature reviewed on adult learners indicate that the interpretations and constructions of the role and identity of student differ among individuals and change throughout the process of education. As symbolic interactionism proposes that "people actively construct their world "through talk […], through action, through systems of meaning, through memory, through the rituals and institutions that have been created […]" (McLeod, 2001 p.2), a methodology that generates verbal rather than quantifiable data is appropriate. Hence semi-structured individual interviews were used as the data collection method, to gain insights into the participants' worlds. Kleinman *et al.* (1994) suggest that interviews are a suitable method to permit a

researcher to explore how people adapt or maintain an identity when faced with new experiences. Interviews provide a way to obtain detailed information (Denscombe, 1998), as well as a way of exploring how participants define their experiences and interpret them (Murphy *et al*., 1998), as participants are seen as experiencing individuals who actively interpret and construct events (Silverman, 1993).

A series of interviews rather than a once-off interview was chosen to explore the area of identity because constructing identity is an enduring process (Pollard, 2003). Interviews were conducted at two points during the first academic year, between the first and second years and at the end of the second academic year. As Wilson (1997 p. 364) points out, being a mature student is a continuous process and "thinking about the experience of being a mature student does not mean having a unified system of beliefs which tell them how to react, feel and think". Using multiple interviews also provide the "opportunity to ask additional questions and to get corrective feedback on previously obtained information" (Reinharz, 1992 p.37 quoted in Merrill, 1999 p.51). The participants' concerns and experiences changed as the course progressed.

Participants were selected from the intake of first year students from a three year part-time B.A. (Ord.) in Social Care Practice in September 2004. These students were practitioners who had experience in a social care practice setting and continued to work while doing the course. As is common with qualitative research the sampling method was purposive. It was a volunteer sample (Seale and Filmer, 1998) and purposive in that selection was made from a group who fulfilled the eligibility criterion of commencing a course in higher education related to their work (Silverman, 2005). All students in the first year group were invited to take part in the research. Twenty students (54% of the group) expressed

interest in taking part in the research but due to students later withdrawing for a variety of reasons, the final sample size was fifteen. Consent forms informing participants of their rights to confidentiality, anonymity and right to withdraw were completed.

Factors Impacting on Integration and Separation of Identities

Professional Identity and Prior Learner Identities

While some participants described their previous educational experiences as being negative this did not appear to impact on their orientation towards or engagement with their present course. On the other hand, participants who had experienced educational success in the past viewed this as indicative of a level of ability and expressed fears about failure.

While students' assessment of the value of the educational material to their work practices is reported to have an impact on what they choose to learn (Heron and Chakrabarti, 2002b), reflecting their professional identity, in this study this was found to interact with their existing learner identities. Participants' judgement of their specific abilities affected their orientation towards specific modules on the course. One participant who stated that "I'm not good at remembering facts, I can't remember poetry, can't remember lyrics of songs. Hate science, can't remember formulas" and judged his learning strength to be in "waffly subjects […] where you add a bit of opinion", saw modules where there is "fiddly detail" and "facts" to be remembered as unimportant to his work. Another participant who describes himself as being 'practical', as opposed to 'academic', saw what he described as more theoretical modules as being not directly relevant to social care practice:

> They [sociology and social policy] do have an impact but they don't on the floor. So I just
> don't see the relevance really because probably I'm a more practical person, than learning

about this history and that. That's why we're going to college so why are we learning something that is not so relevant.

Anxieties – College Setting and Possible Threats to Professional Identity

Fear (Merrill, 1999), and feelings of being "dumb and unprepared" (Brookfield, 1999 p.11) are reported among adult students entering college, as well as initial concerns about the ability to learn (e.g. Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Moore, 2004). This could be related to perceived language differences between everyday life and the academic environment as concerns about the language used in lectures and assignments is reported (Murphy and Fleming, 1998; Merrill, 2001). As one participant states:

> You know I think it is being in college when people have these expectations of all these words and I'm a simple straight person and I use simple words.

However experience and confidence in the college environment led to changes with regard to language expectations.

> I would say I feel more confident in being able to take time and try and translate it into my own words. Whereas at the beginning I just thought I had to do all big words.

Anxiety about college can be exacerbated for work-related learners as professional education can require participants to critically examine their work practices, thereby invalidating existing beliefs (Bamber and Tett, 2000), and leading to readjustment of professional identity. Yielder (2004 p.64), argues that when "new experiences are inconsistent with our habits or expectations" anxiety arises, which can cause resistance to new learning and experiences. The outcome of this can be the student and worker identities are kept separate rather than integrated with the aim of protecting the individual's professional identity. A safe learning environment in which students feel safe and have good

relationships with peers and staff is emphasised to minimise the anxiety of adult learners (e.g. Senior, 2001;Gallacher *et al.*, 2002; Pollard, 2003), in particular when the course is work-related (Miers *et al.*, 2005).

Despite reports from participants of feeling involved and respected by the staff, two participants in particular appeared to keep the social identities separate. Consistent emphasis on competence in their work suggested that these participants were protecting their professional identities. Appeals to the primacy of workplace experience and policies and practices (Cervero, 1992) and a division between theory and practice and were made.

> What I have seen over the years and I'm sure I'll continue to see is people who are very academic and very good at theoretical stuff but on a practice level I would say that I am streets ahead of them. […] Dealing with issues, problems, relating. Whereas someone who may have the qualification, or qualifications as long as your arm but put them in the real world of residential care and what it brings up wouldn't deal with it as effectively and I possibly can or have done.

> I think I'm very good at my job but don't ask me any questions on theoretical stuff 'cos I'm just going to freeze.

Views of the Relationship between Theory and Practice

The view that theory is generated by academics "far removed from the real life practice setting" has been found with nurses (Burton, 2000 p. 1011) and that theory is irrelevant 'jargon' among community educators (Bamber and Tett, 2000). Particularly in early interviews this view was found among participants. For example, one participant states:

> I've always found theories used as an excuse. Recently when one client of mine was warned about slamming doors and abusing people and I sat and listened in disbelief hearing four different views. […] All we seem to be doing in making excuses for him.

Thus, rather than being due to other features of the college setting, this division between worker and student identities appears to be based on participants' views of the relationship between theory and practice, which in turn is affected by how theory itself is viewed. Eraut (2003) distinguishes between theory being "regarded as a direct guide to action" (p.62) versus theory being considered to be an intellectual resource "that aids one's understanding of a context or an issue" (pp.61-62). He points out that the transfer of theoretical knowledge between disciplines is more likely to be problematic when the former view is held.

Adult students do report conflict between the 'knowing about' environment of the college and the 'knowing how to' environment of the workplace (MacDonald and Stratta, 1998; Martin, 2003). Differences in expectations of lecturers compared to students with regard to the use of theoretical as opposed to practical knowledge was apparent in this study. As found by Sutherland (1999) the work-related nature of an educational course can lead to students using a more concrete and practical approach in learning and writing rather than the abstract and theoretical approach valued in academic institutions (Boud, 2001; Martin, 2003). Whalley (1999, p.5) points out the difficulties for academic staff in balancing the development of "students' self confidence by accepting and valuing their experience" while developing their understanding by encouraging them to venture beyond the 'safety' of their own experience" to meet the requirement of academic writing of embedding experience in theory. Particularly with modules perceived as being most directly related to work, some participants appeared to have difficulty understanding the role of theory. As one participant stated about one of his assignments:

> S/he said it was too much common sense [and not enough theory]. I tend to go off with my examples.

In addition, Adams *et al.* (2006) suggest that "an idealised version of the profession" may be presented in an educational programme that is different from "the real work practised by the existing members of the profession" (p.57) which could lead to rejection of the information. While this was referred to by a minority of participants it was found to encourage debate rather than outright rejection suggesting the influence of pedagogical strategies:

> Now I would be frustrated with him because he talks about always is the ideal so that gets a bit like you get into fights with him. You know we always strive for the ideal but there is no point in fighting with him you know he just, in that situation and fighting and fighting because he just comes back with what the ideal is and you just come back with the reality

Part of Reflection in Learning

To situate practice in theoretical frameworks as well as learning from practice experiences Eraut (1994) suggests that professionals require designated time to reflect on practice. Studies indicate this is not facilitated in social care practice. Smith (2005 p.268) notes incongruity within residential child care between the importance of reflection and professional judgment and the structures within which the practitioner must work, where "management push a competency and best practice agenda". Even when studying for a qualification in social care students report time, insufficient resources and workload as factors which prevent them reflecting on knowledge and using it in practice (Forrester-Jones and Hatzidimitriadou, 2006). Social care practitioners themselves have reported not seeing the purpose of "thinking about doing" (Eisikovits and Beker, 2001 p.430). Prominent in participants' initial interpretations of the role of the social care practitioner are notions of care, relationship

building and advocacy indicating a professional identity based on being a practical and caring person. As one participant suggests:

> Care workers are fine for the practical stuff but don't get me to write about it.

A lack of facilitation of reflection through an absence of formal supervision has also been reported (Heron and Chakrabarti 2002b). Findings in this study indicate that participants felt that it was their responsibility to make links between practice and theoretical frameworks:

> I felt that [linking theory and practice] was up to me mostly. In fact I don't think I had a discussion with anybody […] about theory and put it into practice.

And that in the day-to-day work of the practice setting supervision was not always a priority:

> Yeah I think not finding time for supervision will always happen where I am because there's always something crops up.

Participants who showed the most evidence of reflecting on work practices and the nature of social care work incorporated 'being open to new ideas' into both identities.

> It's great to go back and get your mind expanded or get pushed around a little bit by ideas.

In addition some saw college as a space in which they had the opportunity to reflect, as also found by Vatcher and Cole (2004):

> You don't have any escape or permission to really reflect deeply in your day to day work you know. Being a student as well permits you. I embraced that whole thing of being a student and analyse and look at what I'm doing.

The use of reflection could also be affected by structural factors in the college environment, particularly the teaching methods and assessment practices, as suggested by Nikolou-Walker (2007). In addition adult learners are reported to expect at least acknowledgement of their experiences as respect for their adult status (Johnson and Merrill, 2004), if not the use of practice examples and discussion to assisting in linking theory and practice, which in turn assists in the integration of identities. Participants reported involvement in class through discussion as both helping maintain interest and assisting learning:

> I think the best way of learning anything is hearing other people's views. For me that gives lots. Otherwise it's just big academic words that went straight over my head. Hearing other people saying what they thought it was makes it fall into place.

Assessment

However, while discussion in class was welcomed, the provision of relevant material and structure required for success on assessments was expected, as found in other studies (e.g. Ross-Gordon, 1991; Merrill, 1999). Success in the student role increases the salience, defined by Hoelter (1986 p.41) as "the relative importance or centrality of a given identity (and thus role) for defining oneself] of this social identity, in turn motivating the individual to behave in ways consistent with the identity (Burke and Franzoi, 1988) or seek out opportunities to enact the identity (Nuttbrock and Freudiger, 1991). Thus, if professional education aims to change the individual's practice through the transfer of knowledge and behaviour learned in the educational setting to the practice setting, college structures need to encourage the student's success. Successful role performance of an identity is also linked to increased self-

esteem and self-efficacy (Hoelter, 1986) which reduce anxiety. Participants expressed frustration when expectations for, and feedback on assignments was not clear:

> We need written our exactly what they want.

> It's nice to see where you're going wrong. Maybe the next time around you'll be able to change it.

Assessment, though obviously necessary for an accredited course, was viewed by some participants as limiting learning:

> I think you only know what you want to learn by reading everything. [Assignments] take the fun out of it. Thinking I have to write this stuff now and what angle am I coming from. Why are you ruining it with such a rigid essay title?

The method of assessment also affects learning. Gulikers *et al.* (2006; 2008) discuss the influence of students' perception of authenticity in assessment [defined as being similar to students' professional practice (Gulikers *et al.* 2004)]. Not only are examinations are associated with the most fear and stress for adult learners (Merrill, 1999; Sutherland1999) but with surface learning. Participants associated examinations with superficial memorisation as opposed to engagement as well as not contributing to a resource for work:

> Say for psychology. It was 16, 17 weeks of constantly engaging with the ideas so an awful lot of it was retained and you were able to engage with it at a far deeper level. Now I'm left with the thing of getting little flash cards and trying to memorise words.

> If I'm working on something over time it'll stay in my head. You're not trying to cram all this information in and then sure you just lose it after the exam. […] If you ever want to look back on your course stuff you have it all written there.

Strategic vs Meaning Approach to Learning

As previously mentioned, the individual is seen as being able to influence societally defined meanings of roles through making changes to social arrangements to achieve consistency between their interpretation of the role and other identities. (Burke and Stets, 1999; Stets and Burke, 2000). For example the adult student may negotiate and adapt their approach to the college workload and learning depending on other social identities. Depending on the level of integration between the student and professional identities, participants varied in the extent to which they used a reproducing learning style or, as found by Sutherland (1999) with nurse tutors, had an achieving orientation (varying between deep and surface styles) (Enwistle and Ramsen, 1983). While the majority of participants' orientation towards learning was common with Sutherland's findings those who kept the two social identities separate maintained a very surface approach, focusing solely on assessments:

> Like in one of the classes within the second week of the class we had our essay titles for the end of the year and then it became quite obvious that the stuff we were doing every week after that had no relevance or bearing to your essay title so what was the point of going to class.

Other participants showed evidence of postponement of some learning until they had more time:

> I'm really looking forward to there not being any pressure and being able, in the summer, to read the stuff with no pressure on me to get it down on paper.

Organisational Culture

As well as being impacted on by the educational setting learning is affected by the organisational culture, in particular whether others in the professional community "sanction, support and affirm the learning as important in the professional role" and accept or reject the

practitioner's new knowledge (Daley, 2002 p.82; Ottoson, 2000). When knowledge gained in college is rejected in the workplace it can prevent integration of identities and cause frustration for the individual:

> I said at a staff meeting, I believe he [a client] is operating at a three, four or five-year old emotional level. I was immediately told that I can't say that because I was not a trained psychologist. So what is the point of the course if I can't make an assessment and I can't give an opinion.

Other possible supporting factors in the organisation are perceived financial and time supports. These varied from organisation to organisation with this sample and while they were a cause of resentment for some participants, did not appear to influence orientation towards learning.

Transfer of Knowledge and Skills – Confidence and Frustration

In common with findings from other studies (e.g. Karban and Frost, 1998; Sargeant, 2000; Bamber and Tett, 2000), outcomes indicating integration of identities were found. Participants not only referred to specific knowledge gained, particularly psychology and legislation, but to an increase in confidence as enhancing their work practices:

> I think it gives you more confidence that you have an understanding of national standards and all those kinds of things can just give you, maybe makes you aware of what way you're working and what way you can maybe do things differently or change things.

> Young people come in and I read through their background and take my time to understand their background more since I went to college whereas before I'd look at their background as that's where he was. This is where he is. Let's move on. […] You know I think until we can resolve some things in the past we're not going to be able to move forward whereas before I would have never really stopped and thought about it.

The experience of partaking in education is described as increasing confidence, as has been documented in other studies of adult learners (e.g. Stevens, 2003; Moore, 2004). This confidence is transferred to the workplace and as a consequence improves work practices. Success in the student role leads to verification of this identity which makes behaviour associated with it more likely to be transferred to other situations:

> My confidence level has risen and I feel better equipped to handle bad situations. I sense the kids feel it too and respond as they know you are in control.

> I think it's [taking part in the course] having some impact, confidence and relationships. When I'm confident it gives me the opportunity to interact more with the clients and with the team.

In addition participants refer to being better able to express themselves in the workplace, which could be considered to be a transferable outcome from college work:

> My language changed. […] I'm becoming more articulate in what I want to say […] and people are listening to it more rather than this bullish kind of guy running in.

Undertaking a work-related college course, on the one hand, gives participants the confidence to question work practices and feelings of empowerment through theoretical validation of practice (Vatcher and Coles 2004), but on the other hand frustration with work practices due to higher expectations is also found (Karban and Frost 1998; Vatcher and Coles 2004). This could be construed as causing conflict to the participants' professional identity. Some participants expressed disillusionment with the social care system and concern about the safety and needs of clients:

> We should be doing a hell of a lot more for them but we can't but it states that we should be. […] It's resources and it's red tape as well with the health board. […] They're saying you

> can't lock them in and you can't blah, blah, blah. You can't keep them in so they can stay
> out there 'til four if they want, drinking, but yet in the Child Care Act safety is paramount.

> 'Cos a lot of our systems in the residential units are designed to meet the needs of the unit.

Conversely, another participant, rather than becoming disillusioned, expressed an increased feeling of personal autonomy, using knowledge and confidence gained to fight the system:

> College has made me much more articulate and more politicised in terms of standards. I can
> just whip them up. Why are we learning about these things when we are not implementing
> them and I am not going to be accountable or complicit for the health board.

Conclusion

The complexity of the interacting relationships between an individual's identities and social contexts makes it difficult to pinpoint casual factors that can assist in the integration of student and professional identities to meet the aims of professional education. However this research does highlight factors that can encourage viable student identities and the transfer of knowledge and skills to the workplace. In the educational setting, pedagogical strategies that make use of the students' experiences but also locate these in a theoretical context not only encourage involvement and ownership of the experience but also introduce the students to a broader source of knowledge than workplace practices. Preparation for assignments and sensitively focused feedback contributes to success in the student role thereby increasing self-esteem and self-efficacy. Assignments that promote continual engagement and are seen as authentic by students provide a way of linking theoretical material and practice experiences as well as being used as a resource for work. In particular, findings suggest that there is a need for explicit exploration of students' perceptions of the relationship between theory and

practice, as well as their views on the source of appropriate theoretical knowledge for social care work. Since the structure and organisation of social care workplaces does not appear to encourage critical reflection on practice this could perhaps be facilitated more through the organisation of professional educational courses, for example through teaching and assessment strategies as well as closer relationships between college and practice settings. Both confidence in work practices and frustration with the existing work situation have been found as a result of professional education.

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