

Researching Reflective Practice: an example from post-qualifying social work education^[1]

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ABSTRACT Recent concern over the standard of social work practice, as evidenced by inquiries into child abuse cases, have led to something of a crisis in trust in the profession. As a result, there is now an emphasis on increasing practitioners' competency to practice in complex situations. Critical reflection is seen as key to achieving this increase in competence, and is stressed in both professional guidance and educational policy. National standards for continuing professional development encapsulated in post-qualifying social work awards formalise the processes of reflection on practice and learning through reflection. While most literature concentrates on reflection within the context of educational courses, the research presented in this article describes the extent to which practitioners use reflective and critical thinking skills in everyday practice. Analysis of qualitative interviews reveal that practitioners value the opportunity that post-qualifying awards provide to step back and reflect in-depth on a piece of practice, but that there is neither the time or often the support, to transfer these skills to everyday practice. Reflection emerges as an important tool for learning, but given the complex context of social work practice, it is important that it continues outside of formal education programmes. Barriers and enablers of this process are discussed.

Introduction

New Labour governments have followed a 'Third Way' that is characterised by social justice and modernisation. This emphasis has focused on improving the quality of social care so that it is underpinned by clear and acceptable standards. The implication for social work practice is that there has been a massive expansion of the regulatory apparatus structuring professional practice in the past 7 years, which has implications for the education and continuing professional development of social work practitioners.

Increasing regulation operates on multiple levels in social work, from the oversight of professional bodies, such as the General Social Care Council

(GSCC), competence-based education and more regulated assessment criteria, such as those introduced by Fair Access to Care (Department of Health, 2003). The social work task is increasingly regulated through 'eligibility criteria', which prescribe who is perceived as 'in need' and who may therefore receive a service. This new regulatory focus results in more social workers in statutory settings doing assessments based on eligibility criteria and what Jones (2001) refers to as gatekeeping and policing (p. 553).

The new layers of regulatory control introduced by New Labour have been described as the mobilisation of 'a central regulatory brigade' in its battle to reform social services (Humphrey, 2003, p. 21). It is hoped by Government that these developments will improve standards of care and practice across the board. Reflexivity in these contexts becomes increasingly important as the practitioner juggles with the 'regulatory' and bureaucratic aspects of their roles alongside the need for creativity, autonomy and critical reflection on practice.

Recent inquiries into child abuse, and public concern over the deaths of children like Maria Caldwell, Jasmine Beckford and Victoria Climbié have prompted concern about the quality of social work and social work practice at all levels, and led to something of a crisis in trust in the profession. This has prompted a number of policy initiatives to improve the level of competence within social work and ensure protection for service users. Improving and promoting quality is central to the Government's agenda set out in *A Quality Strategy for Social Care* (Department of Health, 2000), which aims to promote consistency and excellence in care services. The training and development of a more competent workforce is one of three strands involved in achieving this.

Competence has become an increasingly important focus, moving beyond just ensuring a competent practitioner or workforce to what Kemshall (2000) describes as 'meta-competence' or learning to learn. The modernisation agenda has focused on the competence of newly-qualified social workers with a move to a 3-year undergraduate degree that commenced in 2003. The development of Post-Qualifying Awards in Social Work (PQSW) might be seen as a move towards 'meta-competence' with practitioners not only demonstrating competence in their specialist field, but also demonstrating continuing professional development and lifelong learning. The post-qualifying awards for social work provide an opportunity for practitioners to learn through reflection on practice, and through this process to increase competency to practice in complex situations.

Background

The introduction of a post-qualifying (PQ) framework for social work is relatively new and highlights a shift in recent years towards competency-based approaches to professional education. Over the past 13 years, PQ education has formed the backbone of improving standards and competence in social work practice.

Post-qualifying awards in social work are professional qualifications that are achieved by meeting the requirements of the relevant award. The PQ framework was first introduced in 1990 with the publication of the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Workers (CCETSW, 1990) Paper 31, *The Requirements for Post Qualifying Education and Training in the Personal Social Services*. In 1997, the requirements for the PQ framework were reviewed and Paper 31 was replaced by *Assuring Quality for Post Qualifying Education and Training* (CCETSW, 1997). This offers a national standard for competence in education and practice.

The Post-qualifying Award in Social Work (PQSW) is designed to:

- i) develop and extend the level of competence at qualifying level;
- ii) develop and extend workers' level of competence in areas of complex work;
- iii) develop workers' supervisory, training, consultancy or management skills. (CCETSW, 1997)

Key features of competence-based education are an emphasis on outcomes and evidence (Kelly & Horder, 2001) and an acknowledgement of the importance of work-based assessment (GSCC PQSW Framework Document). We argue that the PQ process provides a focus for learning through structured reflection on practice and the provision of evidence of competence.

Post-qualifying Social Work Education

The PQSW is a professional qualification made up of six general and two core requirements. The core requirements should be demonstrated and assessed in an integrated, holistic way through the general requirements. The quality and quantity of evidence produced must be commensurate with that of a final year undergraduate degree.

All students must:

- evaluate the effectiveness of their own practice using a relevant knowledge base, including an understanding of legal and policy contexts and appropriate research;
- demonstrate an explicit adherence to the values of social work and to the provision of ethically sound practice.

Part 1 of the Post-qualifying Award in Social Work (PQ1) is generic and is the first stage in continuing professional accreditation of other PQ2 to 6 competencies. Within the Bournemouth University programme, PQSW competencies are linked to academic requirements of higher education which, in turn, give students access to academic awards.

To demonstrate an adherence and commitment to the values of social work, all PQSW students must:

- identify and question their own values and prejudices, and their implications for practice;

- respect and value uniqueness and diversity, and recognise and build on strengths;
- promote people's rights to choice, privacy, confidentiality and protection, while recognising and addressing the complexities of competing rights and demands;
- assist people to increase control of and improve the quality of their lives, while recognising that control of behaviour will be required at times to protect children and adults from harm;
- identify, analyse and take action to counter discrimination, racism, disadvantage, inequality and injustice, using strategies appropriate to role and context;
- practice in a manner that does not stigmatise or disadvantage either individuals, groups or communities. (CCETSW, 1997, p. 4)

To complete PQ1, a portfolio is used as a tool to enable workers to write about their own practice critically and reflectively, and satisfy PQ competencies. Each student is required to produce a portfolio of evidence that includes:

- curriculum vitae (from the point of qualification in social work);
- critical career review;
- third party testimony;
- case study or case studies.

One of the key aspects of the case study is that it provides the opportunity for the candidate to link theory to practice and to critically reflect on their work within a broad theoretical framework. The role of critical reflection is seen as central to this process. Indeed, the hallmarks of advanced practice are described by Youll & Walker (1995) as 'the capacity for reflection, systematic review and critical analysis used in the development of responsive and innovative services' (p. 203). Students must demonstrate how they develop their knowledge from experience in practice or as 'reflection-on-action' (Schon, 1987). Within this process, students are encouraged to explore the role of 'self' as it embraces the intellectual, rational, intuitive and affective responses (Ruch, 2000). The outcome of this critical reflection should be transformative (Moon, 2000), in that it results in a changed perspective on experience as students attempt to make sense of their practice and values. Consequently, their practice and competency develop.

The nature and application of knowledge and understanding is a key dimension of professional work. Social worker practitioners not only draw on positivist knowledge and theory, but have to transform this in light of learning from past experiences (reflection-on-action) and reflection-in-action (Gould, 1996).

The socio-political and cultural context of practice is also important within this reflective process because an understanding of how political and societal values shape social work paradigms and interventions is central (Skerrett, 2000). Indeed, what sets social work apart from other caring

professions is the location of individuals in their social context (Scourfield, 2002). Social work practice is often value laden, and it is important for practitioners not to lose sight of their own values and personal self in practice. Critical reflection can inform and transform practice by engaging 'with both unconscious and conscious understandings and with thoughts and feelings' (Ruch, 2000, p. 102).

A number of factors may encourage or discourage the process of reflection, including management or organisational support (Gorman, 2000), frameworks for encouraging students to explore areas of practice outside their comfort zone (Burton, 2000), and tensions in social work knowledge, ethics and values (Scourfield, 2002).

Bournemouth University's programme feedback has highlighted that many social work professionals are unsure how to access evidenced-based practice, and lack skills to appraise and use it to aid critical reflection. Therefore, giving professionals tools in terms of information literacy and critical thinking skills are some of the starting points to aid reflective practice.

PQ1 students at Bournemouth University describe how the process of undertaking the award has altered the outlook of their working life. Students frequently comment that it provided a clear opportunity to stop and take time to reflect in an otherwise busy, hectic schedule – it mattered to them (Young & Keen, 2002). Importantly, some professionals appear unable to reflect on their practice, and by being unable to demonstrate reflective practice within their PQ1 portfolio, they are not able to register with the General Social Care Council as having demonstrated PQ competence. They are thus prevented from undertaking complex social work, and ultimately the profession and public are protected.

Research into PQ1 Students' Views of Reflective Practice

Methods

Research was undertaken in spring 2003 to explore the views of PQ1 candidates, their line managers, and PQ1 assessors with regard to reflection and reflective practice. The mass of literature that exists about reflection focuses mainly on reflection within educational programmes. It has been argued that 'where it has influenced practice, it has often been a rather denatured, safe or naïve conception of reflection' (Boud, 1999, p. 124). The purpose of this work was to gain a real-world understanding of reflection within social work practice and the extent to which perspectives on reflection are shared across the three groups. Only the candidates' views are reported in this article.

Fourteen candidates – all those who submitted their portfolios in January 2003 – were interviewed. There were five male and nine female candidates. Six had been qualified social workers for 3 years or less, four for between 4 and 6 years, and four candidates had been qualified for over 10 years.

The research took the form of qualitative telephone interviews. The telephone has become an increasingly accepted form of communication and a

way to conduct research interviews (Sarantakos, 1993; Carr & Worth, 2001). All interviews were conducted by the same researcher (NY) and all except one took place within the working day. A topic guide with a list of areas to be covered was used with each respondent. The topic guide was used flexibly according to the flow of the interview and responses given, but allowed all areas of interest to be covered. It also meant that qualitative data could be structured for the initial analytical stages.

The interviews were taped with permission and transcribed verbatim. The first stage of analysis involved reading through all transcripts to obtain an overall view of and familiarity with the data. The material was then organised into charts using the 'framework' approach (Richie & Lewis, 2003). This allowed themes to be analysed across respondents, and the data to be studied for similarities and differences in perceptions, experiences and approaches. The themes were broadly guided by the question topics, but themes arising during analysis were also included. The sections below briefly describe the main findings as they relate to the themes of this work. Single quotation marks (") are used to denote verbatim speech.

Results

Definitions. Definitions of reflection are far from certain. The literature contains a number of diverse meanings, categorisations and levels. Equally, definitions offered by respondents were broad and variable, and illustrated a range of levels of reflection. For these candidates, reflection is about 'thinking', 'considering', 'looking', 'bringing past experience' into current actions and 'questioning'. Examples of reflections on personal and interpersonal aspects of practice were given, as well as reflections on the social-political context of practice. Personal aspects include actions within a particular case, personal strengths and limitations, and roles and possible conflicts. Examples of interpersonal issues were their working relationships and interactions with clients, including power differentials, conversations and the impact of self.

Essentially then, reflection involves practitioners thinking about their own practice and being aware. Although reflexive elements were present, much of what candidates describe from their everyday practice was on a descriptive rather than critical level, perhaps equal to Clarke et al's (1996) deliberative reflection, which uses context bound and non-contextualised professional knowledge and 'allows professionals to practice thoughtfully, intelligently and carefully' (p. 177).

For these candidates, reflective practice involves being able to step back, look at a situation and consider alternative forms of action. By being aware of their actions they try to ensure that the decisions they make are the most appropriate in that situation. For some candidates, reflective practice would ideally involve being able to put into practice the results of reflection, thus completing the loop, although it was not generally possible to be so systematic and thorough in reality. Others mention that practising in a reflective manner

enables them to set practice into a larger context, either in terms of legal framework, socio-political organisation or theoretical background.

Purpose of reflection. Candidates saw reflection as either an ‘essential’ or ‘important’ tool in their professional repertoire. Social workers work ‘with human beings, with very complex problems’ and if they become ‘more aware of what you are doing, it improves your practice, it helps you challenge oppression, it helps you become aware of how you affect situations and people’s lives’.

For many candidates, reflective practice is about the continuous development and improvement of their practice, helping them do things better and providing information for use in future similar situations. It could help them become more rounded, professionally confident and competent practitioners. Reflection enables learning from and about practice, and identification of gaps in knowledge.

Keeping in touch with social work values and the goals of the individual means that decision-making is not just an automatic process – this is an important outcome of reflection. Reflecting on practice is mentioned as necessary to make practice more accountable. The idea of reflection helping social workers to check aspects of their practice and to be more ‘professional’ in terms of both competency and being in touch with social work values, is echoed throughout the interviews. These findings suggest that practitioners who have the opportunity for structured reflection are beginning to integrate the often conflicting requirements of a managerial and a reflective approach to social work practice. Example 1 (below) illustrates these points using the case of a practitioner called Tom (this name is fictitious and identifying information has been removed). In turn, this supports Froggett’s (2002) assertion that reflection can help to counteract tendencies towards mechanistic practice:

Example 1

Tom has been qualified for three years and works within an integrated service team for adults. For Tom, reflection involves ‘thinking about things [...] in a way that allows me to take a critical approach to my own assumptions’ in order to continually be able to practice in a better way. Three concurrently held roles were identified – an employee of an organisation, a social worker and an individual – as well as the tension that could arise as a consequence of role conflict. Tom uses reflection to ‘resist a service-centred approach’ to practice that excludes and labels people, and to explore tensions between, for example, a ‘practical service-centred understanding of need [...] and a wider understanding of what should constitute a need’.

Opportunities for reflection within the team and within the supervision process are limited, the focus being on audit targets and formal outcome measures. Reflection allows Tom to keep in touch

with core social work values and keep a critical distance from purely target-driven practice. Reflection within the PQ1 forced him to focus on particular issues in a 'formal way' that was not usually done within everyday practice.

Barriers and enabling factors. Time and pressure of practice are by far the most frequently mentioned barriers – 'I think with the volume of work we have we don't have a great deal of time to sit here and think'. Put another way, it is easy 'to get into a non-reflective, let's put a plaster on a cut, sort of approach'. Thus, the candidates acknowledged the tension between the ideals and reality of practice, and echoed the comments of Laing (1969, cited by Martyn 2000, p. xvi):

We have hectic jobs; our theorising is often done in the midst of our activity, or in our spare time when we are not too exhausted ... An advantage of this is a certain empirical pragmatic approach. Disadvantages are that without time for critical reflection we may become dogmatic in theory and keep repeating ourselves in practice.

Factors enabling reflection are mostly structural. Having a good relationship with their manager or working within an open, approachable team enables individuals to feel safe enough to discuss cases with others. Organisational policy that promotes reflection within social work practice or senior practitioners who provided leadership created a culture and atmosphere that was supportive and inclusive. On the other hand, a team and management structure that does not support the legitimacy of reflection as a component of practice, and sees it as a luxury or an irrelevance is understandably restrictive for those who are positive about reflective practice and its benefits. Having a social work degree or diploma student within the team could provide a number of positive effects and encourages a questioning approach to practice issues. Team meetings, group supervision or monthly research meetings focusing on a particular area of value to a team's current practice are highlighted as useful in providing space to think and an opportunity to learn. For candidates who had access to them, these initiatives may have legitimised and normalised the process of reflection within everyday practice.

Reflection within PQ1. As mentioned previously, Bournemouth University uses a portfolio approach to allow practitioners to demonstrate that their practice fulfils the PQ1 competency. Most candidates were familiar with the process of writing reflectively, as it had been a component of previous training, notably the qualifying social work award (DipSW). The PQ1 process was variously described as 'useful', 'worthwhile', a 'valuable time to catch up' and a 'positive experience'.

In completing the course and constructing the portfolio, candidates have time and space to look in-depth at a piece of practice and the supporting literature in that area. This acts as a 'refresher' or a 'brush up', helping them to

'refine skills' and giving them the opportunity to step back and think again, honestly and objectively, about their practice. Candidates stated that the process proved to be a good reminder about social work values and illustrated how much they had learnt and developed since qualification. Previous studies have also found that candidates view this opportunity for in-depth exploration and reflection positively (Young & Keen, 2002).

Candidates described how the writing of the portfolio was a tool for reflection on practice and provided a way of working through a piece of practice. By writing things down and going through the account, respondents noted that a certain amount of clarity may be obtained, different perspectives seen and further analysis undertaken. A critically reflective account also requires that the implicit is made explicit. In other words, underlying models and ways of working that are adhered to have to be 'unpicked', explained and analysed.

As a consequence of the PQ1 programme, some candidates noted that they spent more time in supervision than they would normally have done. The process of in-depth discussion and construction of a written case study appears to have aided reflection and understanding at PQ level.

Completing a reflective portfolio at this PQ stage of their careers was described as useful, both in terms of personal and professional confidence, and understanding. Having post-qualifying practice experience to draw on was suggested as particularly beneficial to learning and enables theory to be related to practice in a meaningful way. Example 2 below illustrates this point through a description of Helen's experience (the name has been changed to preserve anonymity):

Example 2

Helen works with adults with physical disabilities and has been qualified for four years. Writing a reflective portfolio for the PQ1 was not entirely new as there were similar requirements for the DipSW qualifying course. However, writing with real-world knowledge acquired post qualification was more meaningful than discussing case studies based on ideal situations during qualification. Completing the portfolio meant that she looked at literature and at underlying principles – something that is done in education but not necessarily in everyday practice – and she discovered that although she doesn't 'automatically think I am following x or y theory, in practice I am'.

It is notable that several candidates, as part of PQ1, had read some of the same literature that they covered during their previous training. These sources were re-read in a different light as candidates now had practice experience to draw on, which served to consolidate knowledge and added to the integration of theory and practice.

Discussion

The Context of Social Work Practice

Social work is about working with people who may be marginalised, disadvantaged and powerless within society. Social workers practice in settings characterised by enormous diversity reflected through religion, ethnicity, culture, language, social status, family structure and lifestyle; so for practitioners, the 'learning milieu' (Boud & Walker, 1990) is one of great diversity and complexity.

Practice often centres on 'crisis' situations in which practitioners are required to work in challenging areas. For this, practitioners need to develop an awareness of the complexity of factors influencing their practice on personal, cultural and structural levels. The complexity of the social work practitioner's experience takes place in what Schon calls the 'swampy lowlands' (Schon, 1987, p. 42).

The affective and value dimensions of social work practice are central here because practitioners can find themselves in situations that are not only complex, but uncertain. Their own values may be challenged when they find themselves caught between the needs of the individual and the demands of society. Tensions may exist between understanding the structural inequalities affecting the lives of social work clients and an individual's right to dignity, choice, confidentiality and protection (Jordan, 1991). Research has highlighted the importance of 'knowledge in action' when working with these tensions, as social workers attempt to provide an individualised service, while considering the impact of social inequality (Scourfield, 2002).

Tensions may also be increased by the changing nature of social work practice. As a profession, social work has moved to more managerial and procedural systems, along with a 'top-down' approach due to increasing government regulation and moves toward greater accountability (Froggett, 2002). This might be seen as the antithesis of reflective practice, as Howe (1996) suggests 'the emphasis is on what people do rather than what people think' (p. 91).

The focus on managerial approaches, particularly evident within care management, has left many practitioners feeling deskilled (Ainley, 1993). This has led to tensions between professional values and restrictions posed by agency accountability and funding criteria. Best value is now a central concept within social work practice and is typified by the three 'E's: economy, efficiency and effectiveness (Gorman, 2000).

However, despite this increased managerial and procedural influence, the complex nature of social interactions means that 'reflective practice' remains central for social work practitioners, and 'may offset tendencies to mechanistic and formulaic proceduralism' (Froggett, 2002, p. 134). Within this context, 'reflection' is an essential part of the social worker's 'kit-bag', enabling them to learn from their practice and develop new ways of working in a constantly changing practice context.

Reflective Practice within Social Work

Reflective practice enables social workers to engage with the complexities they face in practice, allowing them to make sense of situations while being aware of agency requirements (Martyn, 2000). Recent trends in social work education highlight the need for a broader understanding of social work theory and knowledge (Gould & Taylor, 1996; Parton, 2000) and raise the importance of experiential knowledge gained from practice experience.

Reflexivity is also central to the reflective process. An individual's capacity for reflexivity is central to anti-oppressive practice and encourages the development of self-awareness, whereby individuals consciously reflect on their actions, and question the value of the decisions and judgements they make, taking into account their social, political and ethical contexts. Awareness of the impact of 'the self' on others is therefore key within reflective practice – 'reflexivity gives reflection a chance to work' (Payne, 2002, p. 127).

The process of reflection is also apparent within a new paradigm of process knowledge in social work (Sheppard & Ryan, 2003). This is a methodology of practice decision-making and explores the processes by which judgements are made. These might include critical appraisal and hypothesis development and testing. Links can be made here to the role of 'transformative learning' (Moon, 2000), whereby critical appraisal and reflection lead to the development of restructured and creative practice. Others have expressed this as a critical or emancipatory phase within reflection that involves not only a critique of practice conflicts but also self-critique, leading to practice learning and change (Kim, 1999).

Although reflection is central to social work practice, the data overall provides little in the way of evidence to show that social workers are critically reflecting at a transformative level or systematically using recent research in their day-to-day decision-making. However, the candidates did have examples of reflexivity and practice decision-making involving practice knowledge of both self and others, as well as law, policy, values and underpinning paradigms (Sheppard & Ryan, 2003). What appears is a picture of social workers perhaps not engaging in critical reflection, but in 'mindful practice' and striving to meet organisational demands, while being aware of the uniqueness and complexity of the individuals they are working with and their value base as social workers. A similar picture of problem-focused reflection in practice has also been found in research with nurses (Teekman, 2000).

As identified within the nursing profession, reflection may suffer from the Hawthorn effect (Huber, 1996), with practitioners keen to reflect when demanded by professional body recognition, but not keen when there is no recognition for doing so. A number of authors have highlighted the importance of a positive institutional context if reflective practice is to flourish (Gorman, 2000; Blumenfield & Epstein, 2001; Glaze, 2002). Similarly, within this research, candidates identified organisational encouragement and structures such as peer group supervision or time given for research meetings as enabling reflection to occur.

As the social work profession strives to become more accountable (Froggett, 2002), time available for reflection is perhaps a luxury for many practitioners (Howe, 1996). Indeed, time and pressure of work were cited as the major barriers to reflection. Exploration of the complexities of practice is, for most, undertaken in time snatched between meetings or with colleagues.

Conclusion

This research highlights that although practitioners engage in informal reflection around their practice, and issues of power and inequality, few found time to undertake systematic reflection on the theory and research base of social work. The 'space' provided by the PQ1 programme to look in-depth at a piece of practice was valued by candidates and beneficial for ongoing learning. PQ awards formalise the process of learning through reflection on practice, but for most this is not sustained in practice situations. Clarke et al (1996) suggest that deep reflection on the fundamental basis of practice and the acquisition of knowledge is difficult to achieve in isolation, suggesting an important role for mechanisms such as supervision or peer group meetings.

The use of critical reflection within PQ1 has been shown to be an important tool for allowing professionals to learn through reflection, as well as demonstrating their competence to practice in complex areas of work. By critically reflecting on experiences and issues encountered, candidates begin to engage in experiential learning (Maudsley & Strivens, 2000). This may well lead to meta-competence (Kemshall, 2000) as practitioners reflect not only upon 'learning on action' but 'learning in action' (Schon, 1987). However, for critical reflection to be sustained within practice, it needs to be both encouraged and valued within the organisational culture and team environment.

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Note

- [1] This is a work in 'progress' and should not be cited without the expressed agreement of the authors.

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