

# How social work students develop the skill of professional judgement: Implications for practice educators

**Joanna Rawles<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** This article is based on findings of research into how social work students begin to develop expertise in professional judgement during their practice placements and what enables, facilitates and supports them to do so. The research sought to understand the ‘authentic professional learning’ that took place for social work students who were at the point of qualification. The findings indicate that the optimal environment for the development of the skill of professional judgement is one in which there is the presence and positive inter-relationship of three domains of learning: *professional responsibility*, *the facilitation of the professional voice* and *learner agency*. The role of the practice educator was pivotal to this development but the findings go beyond merely re-articulating the positivity of the student/educator relationship to illuminating what it was about the practice educators’ pedagogical approach that facilitated the development of the skill of professional judgement. This article has a particular focus on implications for practice educators and others who support professional work-based learning. The research indicates the benefits of adopting an autonomy-support approach and the article provides ideas for how this might be incorporated into practice placements.

**Keywords:** professional judgement; work-based learning; autonomy-support; Critical Incident Technique; social work education; professional education

1. Head of Social Work, The Open University

**Address for correspondence:** joanna.rawles@open.ac.uk

**Date of first (online) publication:** 22nd January 2021

## **Introduction**

In this paper I will present findings from a small-scale qualitative research study into how social work students in England began to develop the skill of professional judgement whilst on practice placement and what enabled and supported them in doing so. For the purpose of this article I will focus principally on the implication of these findings for those in the crucial role of educating and assessing students in practice. In doing so I hope that it will not only contribute to the evidence and debates about the learning of professional judgement by social work students but also on practice educators' approach and decision making about this important aspect of student learning.

The importance of the relationship between social work students and their practice educators has long been apparent in research (Knight, 2000; Fortune, 2001; Killick, 2005; Lefevre, 2005; Wilson & Kelly, 2010). The research I present here indicates that whilst a good relationship is a necessary and important foundation for social work learning in practice, it was the pedagogical approach of the practice educator that proved particularly valuable to students. The way in which the practice educator facilitated student learning was a key enabling factor in developing the analytical professional confidence necessary for students to embark on professional judgement for social work.

Terminology in social work education varies across the different nations of the UK and globally. As this research was conducted with students in England I use the English term 'practice educator' rather than practice assessor, practice teacher or field educator. I also use the term 'placement' or 'practice placement' where others use fieldwork or practice learning opportunity. Despite the diversity of terms used globally, an assessed period of practice has central importance to all social work education programmes. It has been referred to as a 'signature pedagogy' (Wayne, Bogo & Raskin, 2010). Similarly, the importance of decision making and professional judgement to the social work profession, and indeed all professions, has universal significance. It is therefore anticipated that this research and its application will have resonance across the nations of the UK and internationally not only for social work but for other professions where both learning in practice and expertise in judgement has relevance.

## **Professional judgement as a skill**

The discussion put forward in this article is based on the premise that professional judgement in social work is a skill. There is the need for evidence, observation and knowledge but to confidently configure and make use of these in such a way as to arrive at an informed conclusion and recommendation requires the skill of the professional. This is so much more the case when the grounds upon which that recommendation is to be made are incomplete, contested, context specific and constantly changing, as is a feature of social work. Research into how social workers enact professional judgement in practice provides evidence of the skilled application required which has been variously described as reasoning (Enosh & Bayer-Topilsky, 2015); effortful (Rodrigues et al, 2015); weighing up (Keddell, 2016); sense-making (Helm, 2017) and meaning-making (Kettle, 2017). This is not to deny that tools and frameworks developed to aid decision making can be of immense help as a means of managing information, minimising bias and guiding the process towards sound judgement. As, however, research into social work decision making indicates (Hoybye-Mortensen, 2015; Gillingham, 2017), these tools are most beneficial as a supplement and support rather than as a substitute to what Polkinghorne (2004, p.2) refers to as ‘the situated judgment of practitioners.’

If we accept social work professional judgement to be a skill then it follows that it is something that social work students can develop and social work educators can enable. The importance of this is not unique to social work but is fundamental to all professional learning. Winch (2014 p58), discussing professional expertise, states ‘one of the most important matters that the curriculum for professional education should be concerned with is the development of the ability to reason, judge and act in complex and unpredictable work situations’. Complexity and unpredictability characterise social work practice. Those of us developing and delivering social work education should be preoccupied with preparing students to be confident navigators of this landscape, and thus to be of optimal benefit to service users. The practice placement is a place where that situated judgement can be both developed and assessed and that is why the role of work-based learning and of those educators enabling and assessing work-based learning are pivotal.

## **Research aims**

The two questions guiding the research were:

1. How do social work students develop skills for professional judgement?
2. What enables, facilitates and enhances this development?

The intention was for the study to be focused on professional learning. The aim was not to test decision making nor to evaluate students but to understand the essence of social work student development in relation to professional judgement. Without understanding this development we have little upon which to base our pedagogical approaches. In order to conceptualise the research in this way it was important to perceive students as a valuable and often untapped resource in providing us with a window onto the experience of developing into a professional. The need, therefore, was to think of the research as being conducted *with* students rather than *on* students.

In her research into work-based learning Webster-wright (2009) refers to the need for research that seeks to understand the authentic professional learning of individuals. She argues that to merely evaluate discrete learning inputs, such as a particular training course or teaching tool for example, runs the risk of misunderstanding the holistic, connected and often non-linear nature of learning. She argues that research into workplace learning has focused on 'programmes and content rather than learning experiences' (Webster-wright, 2009 p712). Experiential learning derives from many sources, many people and many situations including the formal and the informal and it was this holism that I sought to understand in relation to learning the skill of social work professional judgement.

## **Methodology, method and data analysis**

### **Methodology**

Given the intentions of the research as detailed above, I used a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology for the study, based on the principles of van Manen (2007, 2016). My goal was to gain insight into the essence of how the participants developed the skill of professional judgement so that

we can understand what underpins this development. I planned to achieve this by hearing, analysing and interpreting (hermeneutic) the experiences of social work students as they reflected upon what had happened on placement and how this had contributed to their journey to becoming practitioners who can confidently form, use and communicate their professional judgement. As the intention was to understand what achieves this development the study drew on principles of Appreciative Inquiry so that we can learn from successful approaches in any given situation (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). The final methodological concept I drew upon was practice-based research (Epstein, 2001) to ensure the research study was grounded in actual placement experiences which would generate the knowledge to address real problems as they are experienced in real world practice situations (Driks, 2006; Rawles, 2016).

### **Method of data collection and analysis**

The research method used was semi-structured interviews with 14 social work students who were on the point of qualification from a Masters level social work programme in England. The interviews were constructed around critical incidents of learning on placement. Critical Incident Technique (CIT) (Flanagan, 1954; Fook et al., 1997; Benner, 2001) as a research method takes many forms (Butterfield et al., 2005). Its use in this research study was not as a means to collect and count specific incidents or events. The aim was for the participants to use a critical incident as a springboard or catalyst for reflection, exploration and interpretation of their experiences and thus build up a picture of the essence of the participants' authentic professional learning. As explained in greater depth elsewhere (Rawles, 2018), it proved disadvantageous to perceive each critical incident as a separate self-contained event giving rise to an episode of learning. This was because the learning arose often as a consequence of many inter-connected incidents or events sometimes happening almost simultaneously sometimes stretching over the entire duration of placement and beyond. I therefore adopted the term 'linked critical incidents' (Rawles, 2018 p100). This conceptualisation provided a means to more accurately reflect how learning was happening and to avoid the risk of creating a false perception that learning experiences are fragmented and atomistic. CIT, when modified in this way, proved a useful tool in ensuring the research was grounded in real world practice experiences as befits a practice-based

and Appreciative Inquiry research approach.

The following statement was used as a prompt for participants to enable them to encapsulate and frame the concept of professional judgement for the purposes of data collection:

To draw a conclusion, make a decision, offer an opinion or recommend a course of action within a professional context as a social work student

My priority was to ensure this statement was broad enough to encompass professional judgement in all areas of social work and to provide sufficient scope for participants to explore different examples of practice. Conceptualisations of professional judgement vary and in the social work literature are not always explicitly defined. Where definitions are presented, the distinction between professional judgement and decision making is often stressed, the former being to make a recommendation and the latter to act on that recommendation (Taylor, 2010). I chose to combine elements of professional judgement and decision making within the statement I presented to the participants as the research did not call for a hard and fast distinction to be made but rather a sharing of critical incidents that illustrated the development of skills which underpinning both professional judgement and decision making. None of the participants showed any confusion due to the inclusion of professional judgement and decision making within the same conceptualisation and all participants understood and accepted that despite conferring recommendations, they were rarely the ultimate decision maker in most social work situations.

The participants were self-selecting from a cohort of 30 students who constituted just under half of a final year masters social work programme. The data collection took place within 2 months of them completing and having passed their qualification. As part of their programme they had undertaken two 100 day assessed practice placements and they were asked to draw examples of their experience from either one or both of their placements. They all shared critical incidents from both placements. The experiences were drawn from many different social work settings and from work with different service user groups including adults and children.

The participants were 10 women and 4 men; The ethnic mix of the students included Black African, Black Caribbean, Black British, South Asian, white British and mixed ethnicity. They were aged between late twenties and early forties and had a range of pre-qualifying social care experience from six months to several years. As this was a Masters programme they all held an

undergraduate degree, several of which were in a non-related subject. The demographics of the participant group were reflective of the cohort as a whole. They were also reflective of Masters social work cohorts nationally in terms of age, education and experience but the cohort had a much higher proportion of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students and a slightly higher number of male students than the national average at that time (Skills for Care, 2016). As this was a qualitative phenomenological study the emphasis was on the rich depth of data to inform the 'why' and 'how' of the subject matter sourced from a small number of participants. It would therefore have been inconclusive to attempt to provide analysis based on the individual demographic differences of the participants and this was not the intention of this particular research project. It is important to note however, that structural inequalities mean demographics such as ethnicity, gender, disability and class do have an impact on education and opportunity and this should inform any consideration of applicability of the research findings.

The data were analysed thematically guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages of data analysis and coded using Nvivo10. I shared the initial stage of data analysis with the participants as a group, now qualified and practicing social workers, so that they could contribute to a further refinement of the interpretation, analysis and to the development of themes. In the findings section of this article I have included extracts of the spoken words of the participants to ensure their voices are foregrounded.

The research was approved by two University research ethics committees in England. One the university from which the participants were recruited and, because this was part of Doctoral study, the other the university where the Doctorate was undertaken.

## **Research Findings**

The findings indicate that throughout the course of their placements the participants were engaged in a considerable amount of professional judgement. This encompassed a range of different types of social work practice including various assessments of need and risk, responding to unanticipated or new events or information as well as judgement about how best to intervene and work with service users. There was, therefore, plentiful and rich material to draw upon for analysis.

The framework of three domains in Fig 1 illustrates what the research findings indicate is needed for the successful development of the skill of professional judgement for social work students. This is '*professional responsibility*'; '*facilitation of the professional voice*' and '*learner agency*'. These domains were generated via an inductive process of thematic analysis based on Braun & Clarke's (2006) model. Data relevant to the research questions were coded, consolidated and developed into a thematic map that formed the basis of the domains. A process of continual reviewing and tracing back from the domains through thematic map to the coded data ensured that the findings were firmly rooted in the narratives of the participants. The contribution of the participants to the analysis provided further authenticity of these findings.

It is important to stress that it is not only the presence of each of these domains of learning but the way in which they interact with one another that creates the optimal learning environment. This is demonstrated on the diagram by two-way directional arrows.



Fig 1  
Developing the skill of social work professional judgement: Three domains to enable learning on placement

---

The meaning and significance of each domain will be explained in turn, illustrated by data examples, before discussing the implications of these findings for practice educators.

## Professional Responsibility

The domain of '*professional responsibility*' refers to the student having the experience of being responsible for aspects of practice and for arriving at professional opinion about that practice. Importantly the significance of this lies in the social work student realising and fully appreciating that it is part of their role to have such responsibility. As one participant put it, professional judgement skills developed 'by virtue of *having* to make the decisions'.

The importance of having opportunities for practice responsibility was evident throughout the interviews and was a subject returned to frequently by all the participants. Frequently shared examples included holding a caseload, carrying out assessments and leading on projects but this sense of responsibility was evident in some way in all the practice examples provided. As the following statements demonstrate, however, it was not merely *doing* the work involved in these tasks that was beneficial to learning but the sense of *ownership* of the responsibility *for* the work:

*I think holding a caseload. I felt a lot of ownership over everything that was in my caseload and knowing that the kind of – although it didn't, because I was a student - that the buck stopped with me.*

*Knowing that you are going to be accountable and it was my name as the author on the report and I was the one sitting there with the judge, right there, .....I knew the case, it was my assessment.*

*Because I am doing the assessment. I am assessing the situation, you did your previous assessment based on whatever the situation was at that time, I am going in with fresh eyes now and I am having to do this and I am having to make judgements based on what I see not based on what someone else has said*

Further analysis indicates that a key reason this sense of responsibility is important is that it leads to a transformational change in the students' development that enables them to begin to appreciate the authority of the role and their place within this, as the following two statements demonstrate:

*I think it was in the middle of the placement when I started to, kind of believe in the authority of the role and just trying to work within that. Because (before) I'd felt my decisions could be, sort of, not have that much impact because I was a student*

*Going through that, kind of, personal process of, actually, this isn't about just pleasing them (service users); this is about my professional judgement. And then actually realising you know, like, the power of that really and thinking, god, I've got this professional judgement now about people that I don't know that well.... you go in, do the piece of work, make a load of big decisions, and then disappear again and leave them with the consequences....you are out there practising social work, the things you do and say have an impact, and realising you need to have skills to do that*

These two sets of extracts illustrate how this sense of responsibility fuelled an increase in professional confidence as the students moved along a continuum from a realisation of 'I know I need to do this' to an appreciation of 'yes I can do this'. The interpretation of confidence here is as a belief in one's ability to undertake something. It is self-efficacy as conceptualised by Bandura (1977) and applied to professional learning by Eraut (2004) and to social work practice by Parker (2005; 2006). Research into work-place learning has identified such self-efficacy as fundamental to professional development (Cheetham & Chivers, 2001; Eraut, 2004; Webster-wright, 2010).

### **Facilitation of the professional voice**

This domain refers to the intervention of others to facilitate and encourage students to formulate, express and explain their professional judgement and opinion. This intervention was highly valued by the participants and demonstrates the pivotal importance of the expertise of practice educators. In summing up what had most helped him to develop his professional judgement, one participant stated that it was being 'facilitated to come up with my own judgement and that was down to the skills of those supervising me'.

There are two key, interrelated aspects to this facilitation that were important to the participants and I have used the following terms to distinguish them:

- Active facilitation
- Responsive facilitation

*Active facilitation* refers to when the student's professional opinion is actively sought and encouraged by the practice educator or by others. This

could be through the practice educator intentionally having a strategy or using an approach to put the student into a position of giving and explaining their view. Participants described this as ‘drawing it out of me’ or ‘forcing me to come up with the goods’ or using ‘a lot of probing questions’. This approach from practice educators was highly valued by the participants as can be seen in the following statements.

*My practice educator was very, very good, and I think when he started to bring dilemmas or situations to discuss, and then he would ask ‘what would you do in this situation?’ And I think it was then that I learned to respond and give my views and professional judgement on things.*

*(My practice educator) would always say, ‘Don’t whiteboard me.’ Which means don’t come to a discussion unless you’ve got some ideas. It doesn’t matter if you’ve got a final conclusion, just some ideas of where you’re going, what you’re doing. And that kind of helped me more as well think about, ‘Before I go and offload all this stuff to him, I need to think about where I’m going with it.*

*‘I found it quite good that she would often challenge my perspectives as well. So it was that thought process of where is it coming from? Where is the theory behind what you’re saying? ..So why do you think that’s happening? Or for any decisions that I made she got me thinking in a mind-frame of why I’m doing something, how I’m doing it’*

Active facilitation also took place as part of informal dialogue during the placement and this too was highly valued. Eliciting their view by simply being asked ‘what do you think?’ was a pivotal moment for several of the participants and one they remembered clearly. It appeared to set off a chain reaction of realisation about social work about themselves as social workers and about their role in professional judgement as the following extracts illustrate.

*I think it was an expectation that you should have opinions... I can remember one of the social workers saying, ‘And what do you think then?’ ..and be like, ‘Didn’t I just tell you?’ ‘No, you told me what you’ve seen, what did you think?’ (laughs). ‘So, okay right, what did I think?’ and so there was a couple of people that were quite, not challenging, but they kind of spurred you on a bit like, ‘Okay, that’s good, and then what?’*

*The email asked what did I think. It was a shock. Because .. they wanted my*

*professional judgement and I was, like, there's people out there that, kind of, view me as a professional. (Laughs) And I was, like, okay, what do I think? I didn't know that I was viewed in that sense. It's only when other people started saying, you know, we want your input to try and help us, or, what is it that you suggest?*

*My work-based supervisor said, 'So,' you know, 'As a practitioner, what do you think?' So I practice social work now, don't I? This isn't just, you know, a voluntary sector support worker role anymore. This is, like, my view on this complex social situation (laughs).*

As all these extracts indicate, the participants derived benefit from being challenged, nudged out of their comfort zone and required to be active rather than passive in their learning and development. There was no indication in the findings of any developmental benefit from merely being provided with the answer or given the information. Constructive challenge has previously been identified in research as a positive aspect of social work student and practice educator relationships (Knight, 2000; Fortune, 2001) and Eraut (2004) identified challenge as a key element of successful professional work-place learning. This research provides further evidence of this but also that for the development of the skill of social work professional judgement, this challenge needs to involve being put into a position of formulating, articulating, explaining and evidencing your own professional opinion thus enhancing your own professional voice. It is worth noting that this challenge presented by practice educators appeared to work because it was enacted within the context of a positive, nurturing relationship which often contained humorous interactions. They were not perceived by the participants as undue demands placed upon them but a genuine attempt to enable development within a valued and respected relationship.

The benefit of *active facilitation* was enhanced when the practice educator and others also engaged in *responsive facilitation*. This encapsulates those occasions where the 'voice' of the student was not actively sought from others but times when the student chose of their own volition to offer their views and opinion. The way in which the practice educator responded to such offers appeared crucial to whether the student experienced this as a positive learning experience or not. Those whose views were listened to and taken seriously used this as fuel to develop their self-efficacy and thus have the confidence to develop this approach further. There were several participants for whom this was a vital component of their development. The

first of the extracts below illustrates the impact on self-efficacy of different approaches from practice educators for the same students. The second extract illustrates the negative impact on self-efficacy when a student's opinion is not valued.

*I got listened to a lot, which was brilliant. My practice educator there, he kind of made me a bit more confident about my professional judgement than (PE in first placement) because he would listen and he would take what I said on board.. and he'd be like, 'No, I trust your judgement on this.' And that was definitely the confidence boost in terms of what I now use.*

*I just remember trying to tell my manager how I felt about it and it didn't really get taken seriously until the GP got concerned about things as well. So it was almost like I'd made my professional judgement that something wasn't right with this case, that maybe the previous conclusions weren't quite fitting right, but it was a struggle that as a student I didn't really feel listened to...it definitely impacted on my confidence in my own views and you know, 'Am I going the right way with this case?'*

The dual components of actively seeking opinion together with valuing opinion when it was offered paid dividends in elevating and developing the professional voice of students. It increased the self-efficacy that was needed for them to be able to embody the role of social worker and channel their professional judgement positively. Those practice educators who were adept at managing the duality of this approach were highly valued by the participants. The following extract illustrates how the combination of *active facilitation* and *responsive facilitation* sets a tone for the whole placement that enables the student to thrive but still provides that challenge necessary for sound, defensible professional judgement.

*I think I doubted myself a lot but I think partly my practice educator helped me and the people that I worked with kind of drew it out of me, and even though she didn't maybe always agree with the decision that I made, she's like, 'But you know this family and you've been working with this family.' So she helped me to kind of you know, sort of understand 'Why do you feel that this is the right decision?'*

## **Learner agency**

The third strand of this developmental jigsaw is learner agency. This refers to the participants' recognition of themselves as learners and their

endeavours to be proactive in developing their expertise. This appeared to be an important mechanism for maximising the learning gained from holding responsibility and being facilitated in that responsibility.

A key element of this was the students' active and purposeful engagement with people and opportunities. All participants discussed being engaged in conversations and used terms such as 'bouncing off people', 'working things through with people' and 'using other people'. Sometimes these were pre-arranged occasions of learning, such as shadowing, other times they were informal and impromptu discussions. The relevance to the domain of learner agency was the students' explicit perception of these encounters as something that they made use of to enhance their learning. What became apparent was that the importance lay not so much in the activity itself but the way in which the student engaged with the activity. One of the participants narrated the following about observing multi-disciplinary team meetings.

*The first few meetings that I watched it was very difficult to understand ... it was just a barrage of information and I just didn't understand ... because they're fast paced, you know, it's a referrals meeting, it's a feedback meeting, it's a joint decision meeting, it's closed. It's over before you know it. Firstly I didn't know what was significant information and what wasn't significant information so that was quite important to find out and I used to just kind of sit over people's shoulders and watch what they were scrolling onto so I watched people quite intently for the first few meeting and I think, you know, that really helped me see which bits I liked and which bits I thought, 'Oh actually, I don't need to do that.'*

Research into social work placement learning and professional learning more generally highlights the benefits of observing and working alongside others (Maidment, 2000; Cheatham & Chivers, 2001; Fortune, 2001; Eraut, 2004; Bogo, 2006). The extract above provides an example of what the student *does* within this observation rather than merely what the activity is and so enables us to understand more fully how learning takes place. Many students are asked to observe such meetings early on in their placement but the learning derived from such activities is not inevitable. For this student, as for other participants, it was what he brought to the activity that made it into a learning experience.

A related element of learner agency was the student being able to connect learning between situations and environments. This was evident in the use of knowledge to inform professional judgement and more generally

the integration between academic learning and learning on placement. The following extract encapsulates this connection-making between learning at university, independent pursuit of knowledge, the formulation of professional opinion and self-confidence.

*The more I think being at uni kind of encouraged me to ..think, if there's certain things that I don't have knowledge of, or things that come up in discussions, then I'll go away and kind of look into it myself and get my own research and form my own opinion of it. So I think, through learning, ..the more I've learnt, the more confident I felt, I think, because it's also the knowledge and how that then impacts on what your opinion is, professionally.*

## **Limitations**

This study was small scale and qualitative and as such cannot be considered to be, nor is intended to be, representative. The purpose of this study was not to compare similarities and differences between students in their learning but rather to understand the essence of the phenomenon of this learning across a group of students with the intention of contributing to the development of an evidence base in this under-research area. As discussed earlier, students are not a homogeneous group and differences in approach to learning and in self-efficacy exist for many reasons. Understanding the essence of an optimal learning approach should always be dovetailed with understanding the needs and preferences of individual learners. The participants in this study were following a postgraduate programme and as such are likely to have had greater educational experience and potentially be older with more life and work experience than students following an undergraduate programme though this is certainly not always the case.

This study took an Appreciative Inquiry approach that scrutinises the learning to be had from when things have worked which can then be used as the basis for developing effective pedagogical strategies. This has proven valuable to reveal the often hidden positive experience and practice of social work education, however, it does not research when students and/or educators struggle which can also be an effective means of contributing to our knowledge base.

## **Discussion, Implications for practice educators: An autonomy supportive approach**

To summarise, learning occurred for these participants as a consequence of the following

- Having responsibility for practice and for professional judgement about that practice. Realising that you are a professional with authority.
- Being encouraged and positively challenged, within a nurturing environment, to arrive at and exercise professional judgement and articulate the reasoning behind it. To have that professional judgement valued and validated.
- Engaging actively with people and opportunities in order to learn and develop as well as connecting experiences of learning within and between environments.

This research further cements the notion of practice educators having a pivotal role in the successful development of each new generation of social workers. It also brings to the fore that being a social work practice educator is a highly skilled educative role. The research highlights that having a good relationship with your student and providing appropriate activities may be enough to enable appropriate learning, particularly if the student has a high level of agency in their approach to learning. If, however, we want an optimum learning experience that enables the development of social workers who can be confident in their role in professional judgement, then a positive relationship and the provision of opportunities is not enough. The practice educator should enable the student to experience the responsibility of practice and consciously endeavor to facilitate the confident development of the students' professional voice. In short, their approach to learning needs to be autonomy-supportive.

The notion of autonomy support in learning developed as a facet of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Reeve (2002, p.138) concludes that 'autonomously-motivated students thrive in educational settings' and 'students benefit when teachers support their autonomy'. I would argue that in shifting our focus from educational settings to professional work-based settings and overlaying this with the particular needs of social work, these research findings magnify the importance of autonomy motivation for students and thus the need for teachers who support this autonomy.

We need to be aware of the danger of implying that students are a

homogeneous group. Students have different starting points and their approach to, and experience of, education is imbued with cultural socialisation and with the discrimination, oppression and disadvantage present in societal structures. This will particularly have implications for the response to them exercising authority and to expectations of the degree of learner agency students demonstrate. This makes it all the more important to clarify what is meant by autonomy and to stress that an autonomy-supportive approach should place as much emphasis on the supportive aspect as on the autonomy.

Deci & Ryan (2008 p16/17) offer the following distinction between being autonomous and being independent 'Autonomy means to act volitionally, with a sense of choice, whereas independence means to function alone and not rely on others'. From the review of the existing research (Cheetham & Chivers, 2001; Eraut, 2004; Webster-wright, 2010; Stanley, 2013; Helm, 2016; Saltiel, 2016;) and from the findings of this research study there is plenty of evidence to indicate that interaction with others is important for both professional judgement in social work and for professional work-place learning. Autonomy is best seen as relational (Nedelsky, 1989; Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000), a subject that I expand upon elsewhere (Rawles, 2018) and will be the subject of a forthcoming article.

The findings, therefore, do not indicate that the practice educator's approach to the student should be to 'throw them in the deep end' or to pile on the level of responsibility and accountability without the accompanying facilitation and support. It does mean, however, that the practice educator should not be reticent in allowing the student responsibility and challenge them 'to come up with the goods', as was said several times by participants. Indeed, the implications of stifling such responsibility and providing solutions rather than seeking them from students is that self-efficacy will diminish and the goal of confident, well thought-through professional judgement will recede. It will also mean assessing students' progress will be more challenging with little upon which to base capability. Reeve (2002 p183) described the role of autonomy-supportive teachers in the following way

*Autonomy supportive teachers generally encourage students to pursue self-determined agendas and then support students' initiatives and intrinsic motivation. This approach is autonomy supportive because the teachers' goal is to strengthen the students' self-regulation*

The following table provides a summary as to how practice educators might align their approach with the findings of this research and in doing so adopt an autonomy-supportive stance.

---

### **Professional Responsibility**

- Provide opportunities where students are responsible and have ownership of work
- Help students perceive themselves as professionals who are responsible

### **Facilitating the Professional Voice**

- Put students into situations where they have to come up with their own professional opinion, based on actual practice as well as through your own teaching and learning strategies. Ask 'what do you think?' Then ask 'why?'
- Explicitly value when students offer their professional judgement and views

### **Learner Agency**

- Do not stifle the students' own pursuit of expertise development whatever form this takes
  - If students struggle to be proactive develop a culture of asking what they have learned from experiences or what they are hoping to learn from each situation
- 

I have worked with practice educators in training using this framework. They produced many examples of ways to use these research findings to maximise student learning. Examples of this include ensuring the student is recorded as case-lead; asking colleagues to approach the student first with queries on a case; be mindful to provide informal positive feedback when students volunteer their ideas and ask the student, prior to shadowing experiences, about potential learning points they wish to achieve.

Practice educators are creative and skilled educators, this research indicates the significant extent to which students' value this and the potential it has for positive impact on the future of the social work profession.

## **References**

- Bandura. A. (1977) Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioural change. *Psychology Review*, 84, 2, 191-215

- Benner, P. (2001) *From Novice to Expert: Commemorative edition*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall
- Braun, V and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101
- Butterfield, L., Borge, W., Amundson, N. & Maglio, A. (2005) Fifty years of the critical incident technique 1954-2004 and beyond. *Qualitative Research*, 5, 4, 475-497
- Cheetham, G. and Chivers, G. (2001) How professionals learn in practice: an investigation on informal learning amongst working professionals. *Journal of European Industrial Training* 25, 5, 246-288
- Cooperrider, D., & Srivastva, S. (1987). Appreciative inquiry in organisational life. *Research in Organisational Change and Development*, 1, 129–169.
- Deci, E. and Ryan, R. (1985) *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. New York: Plenum.
- Deci, E and Ryan, R. (2008) Facilitating Optimal Motivation and Psychological Well-Being Across Life's Domains'. *Canadian Psychology*, 49, 1, 14-23
- Driks, J. (2006). Studying the complicated matter of what works: Evidence-based research and the problem of practice. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 56, 273–290.
- Enosh, G., and Bayer-Topilsky, T. (2015) Reasoning and bias: Heuristics in safety assessment and placement decisions for children at risk. *British Journal of Social Work*. 45, 1771-1787
- Epstein, I. (2001). Using available clinical information in practice-based research: Mining for silver while dreaming of gold. *Social Work in Health Care*, 33, 3/4, 15–32.
- Eraut, M. (2004) Informal learning in the workplace. *Studies in Continuing Education*. 26, 2, 247–273
- Eraut, M. (2007) Learning from other people in the workplace. *Oxford Review of Education*, 33, 4, 403-422
- Flanagan, J. (1954) The Critical Incident Technique; *Psychological Bulletin*, 51, 4, 327-358
- Fook, J., Ryan, M., & Hawkins, L. (1997) Towards a theory of social work expertise. *British Journal of Social Work*, 27, 399-341
- Fortune, A., McCarthy, M. and Abramson, J. (2001) Student Learning Processes in Field Education. *Journal of Social Work Education* 37, 1, 111-124
- Gillingham, P. (2017) Decision making in child and family welfare: The role of tools and practice frameworks. *Children Australia* 42, 1, 49-56
- Helm, D. (2016) Sense-making in a social work office: an ethnographic study of safeguarding judgements. *Child & Family Social Work*. 21, 1, 26-35
- Hoybye-Mortensen, M. (2015) Decision-making tools and their influence on

- caseworkers' room for discretion'. *British Journal of Social Work* 45, 2, 600-615
- Keddell, E. (2016) Weighing it up: family maintenance discourses in NGO child protection decision-making in Aotearoa/New Zealand': *Child and Family Social Work* 24, 4, 512-520
- Kettle, M. (2017) The tipping point': Fateful moments in child protection. *Child & Family Social Work*, 22, 31-39
- Killick, C. (2005) DipSW students' satisfaction with practice teaching on their first placement. *Journal of Practice Teaching*, 6, 1
- Knight, C. (2000) Engaging the Student in the Field Instruction Relationship', *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 20, 3-4, 173-201
- Lefevre, M. (2005) Facilitating practice learning and assessment: The influence of a relationship. *Social Work Education*, 24, 5, 565-583
- Mackenzie, C and Stoljar, N. (2000) Introduction: Autonomy Refigured. in C. Mackenzie and N. Stoljar (Eds.) *Relational Autonomy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Maidment, J. (2000) Methods used to teach social work students in the field: A research report from New Zealand. *Social Work Education*, 19, 2, 145-154
- Nedelsky, J. (1989) Reconceiving Autonomy: Sources, Thoughts and Possibilities. *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*, 1, 7
- Parker, J. (2005) Should you encourage students to assess themselves in practice learning? A guided self-efficacy approach to practice learning assessment. *Journal of Practice Teaching*, 6, 3, 8-30
- Parker, J. (2006) Developing Perceptions of Competence during Practice Learning. *British Journal of Social Work*, 36, 1017-1036
- Polkinghorne, C. (2004) *Practice and the Human Sciences*. New York: State University of New York Press
- Rawles, J. (2016) Developing Professional Judgement Skills: Enhancing Learning in Practice by Researching Learning in practice. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 36, 1, 102-122
- Rawles (2018) Educating for Professional Judgement: How social work students develop skills in practice. Doctoral Thesis. DSW University of Sussex
- Reeve, J. (2002) Self-Determination Theory Applied to Educational Settings. in Deci E, and Ryan, R. (Eds.) *Handbook of self-determination research*. Rochester, N Y: University Of Rochester Press
- Rodrigues, L., Calheiros, M., Pereira, C. (2015) The decision of out-of-home placements in residential care after parental neglect: Empirically testing a psychosocial model. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 49, 35-49
- Saltiel, D. (2016) Observing front line decision making in child protection. *British Journal of Social Work*, 46, 7, 2104-2119

- Stanley, T. (2013) Our tariff will rise: Risk, probabilities and child protection. *Health Risk & Society*, 15, 1, 67–83
- Skills for Care. (2016) *Social Work Education in England*. Leeds: Skills for Care
- Taylor, B. (2010). *Professional decision making in social work*. Exeter: Learning Matters
- Van-Manen, M. (2007) *Researching Lived Experience*. Ontario: The Althouse Press
- Van-Manen, M. (2016) *Phenomenology of Practice: Meaning giving methods in phenomenological research and writing*. Abingdon: Routledge
- Wayne, J. Bogo, M. & Raskin, M. (2010) Field education as the signature pedagogy of social work education, *Journal of Social Work Education*, 46, 3, 327-339
- Webster-Wright, A. (2009). Reframing professional development through understanding authentic professional learning. *Review of Educational Research*, 79, 702–739.
- Webster-Wright, A. (2010). *Authentic professional learning: Making a difference through learning at work*. London: Springer.
- Wilson, G. and Kelly, B. (2010) Evaluating the effectiveness of social work education: Preparing students for practice learning. *British Journal of Social Work*, 40, 8, 2431-2449
- Winch, C. (2014) Know-how and knowledge in the professional curriculum. in M. Young, M & Muller, J (2014) *Knowledge, Expertise and the Professions*. Abingdon. Routledge