



Reflective practice and workplace learning: the experience of MSW students

George Wilson , Trish Walsh & Margaret Kirby

To cite this article: George Wilson , Trish Walsh & Margaret Kirby (2007) Reflective practice and workplace learning: the experience of MSW students, Reflective Practice, 8:1, 1-15, DOI: [10.1080/14623940601138840](https://doi.org/10.1080/14623940601138840)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14623940601138840>



Published online: 19 Feb 2007.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 364



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 8 View citing articles [↗](#)

Reflective practice and workplace learning: the experience of MSW students

George Wilson^{a*}, Trish Walsh^b and Margaret Kirby^b

^a*Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland;* ^b*Trinity College, Dublin, Republic of Ireland*

Although reflection has become increasingly important in social work education there has been little empirical research into student's experience of operationalizing this concept in practice. This article reports on a two-year study of master of social work students' experience of reflecting on their practice in workplace learning in Northern Ireland. Using practice illustrations from the research, the paper explores the status of reflective practice in social work alongside other competing paradigms including evidence-based practice and competence-based approaches to learning. The analysis highlights the value of reflection and the significance of good supervision and support from practice teachers in enabling students to reflect and achieve successful outcomes. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of the findings for the new undergraduate social work degree and argues that there is a need for clearer standards and scope for greater consistency in how reflection is supported and facilitated in workplace learning.

Introduction

An increased emphasis on reflection in the new undergraduate professional qualifying degree in the UK and new regulatory standards for post qualified staff has further reinforced its importance in social work education and practice (GSCC, 2002; NISCC, 2004). Reflective practice is viewed as both central to the process of continuous learning for individual students and a cornerstone for developing social work as a profession (Yelloly & Henkel, 1995; Ruch, 2002). At the same time, workplace learning and a concern to ensure that social workers can function competently in practice from a firm foundation of knowledge based on research evidence have also been emphasized as important prerequisites in social work education and practice.

*Corresponding author. School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast, 6 College Park, Belfast BT7 1NN, Northern Ireland. Email: g.wilson@qub.ac.uk

Like other professional groupings in the UK, social workers are under increasing pressure to demonstrate the value and utility of their work not only to government and employers but also to service users and carers (Sheldon, 2001). Although regarded as a prerequisite for professional development there has been little empirical research into social work student's experience of operationalizing this concept in practice situations (Iyer, 1999; Fook, 2004). The principle aim of this study was to explore student's experience of reflective practice in workplace learning and examine how this aspect of their professional development could be best supported and facilitated. This study was part of a larger comparative piece of research with Trinity College Dublin, which investigated students' perceptions of various aspects of workplace learning and its role in the development of professional knowledge, skills, and values. This paper reports on the Northern Ireland component of the study and focuses specifically on the findings relating to master of social work (MSW) students' experience of reflective practice.

The article begins with a review of the literature on reflection and related concepts in social work education. Focusing on social work education at qualifying level, the value and utility of these concepts is evaluated alongside other competing paradigms including competence-based learning and evidence-based practice. To contextualize the study, an outline is provided of the main components and requirements of the MSW programme at Queen's University, including the key features of workplace learning relating to reflective practice. The next section discusses the methodology of the research and reports on the main findings relating to the experiences of MSW students in developing reflective practice in the workplace. The final section of the paper discusses the range of factors, which might promote or inhibit reflection from the student's perspective. The paper concludes by highlighting the implications of the findings for academic institutions and agencies seeking to develop reflective practice in workplace learning as an integral component of the new undergraduate degree in social work.

The significance of reflection in social work education

Recognition of the value and utility of reflecting on practice in the UK has gradually increased since the development from the early 1990s of competence-based learning and more recently, an emphasis on evidence-based forms of practice at all levels of social work education (Yelloly & Henkel, 1995; Sheldon, 2001; Ruch, 2002). Competence-based approaches in social work have been heavily criticized for being reductionist and functionalist in nature and for producing forms of social work which are divorced from values and anti-oppressive practice (Pietroni, 1995; Ruch, 2002). It has also been argued that competence-based learning in the UK has tended to reflect government and employer agendas with a resulting pre-occupation with procedural and legalistic concerns and regulatory discourses rather than more empowering forms of practice (Pietroni, 1995; Wilson *et al.*, 2005).

As an alternative paradigm, reflection in social work and the concepts associated with it, appear to have a number of advantageous facets and qualities for those

involved in working in contemporary practice environments. Although definitions remain rather imprecise, reflective practice, for example, seems to provide a good basis for helping practitioners bridge the theory/practice gap which has been a perennial problem in social work (Ruch, 2002; Fook, 2004). Schön's (1983) conceptualization of the reflective practitioner as someone who is self-aware and able to constructively prepare, evaluate and improve their own practice through engaging in a process of reflection is clearly advantageous in social work where each practice situation is unique and routine, formulaic prescriptions for interventions would be inappropriate (Ruch, 2002).

In recent years, social workers in the UK have been under increasing pressure by government, employers, service users and carers to demonstrate the value and utility of their work. In increasingly risk averse working environments dominated by policies and procedures, which are underpinned by legislative imperatives, it has been argued that there is a need for social workers to develop a professional knowledge base grounded more clearly on research evidence of what works in practice (Sheldon, 2001). In this context, an evidence-based approach to practice (allied with competence-based approaches to learning) seems to offer social work the prospect of a firm foundation for developing both individual learners and the profession (Sheldon, 2001). However, Webb (2001) has argued that evidence-based practice fails to provide an entirely satisfactory paradigm for developing professional knowledge in social work. According to Webb (2001), evidence-based practice inevitably fails to deliver as social workers have to practice with service users and others in very complex situations which are unique and not generalizable or amenable to the rigorous, scientific forms of enquiry which are usually associated with this approach.

In contrast, it has been argued that the 'artistry' associated with reflective practice (Schön, 1983) elevates social work beyond the technical rational culture in which practice is mainly embedded and 'orthodox' understandings which restrict 'authentic knowledge to empirical, scientifically proven facts' (Ruch, 2002, p. 202). As Gould and Taylor (1996) have pointed out, knowledge and theory are not neutral, ready to apply resources available to fit all situations but in social work need to be filtered through practice experience and in the process transformed in order to be useful in the helping process. Social workers need to be committed to continual self-development including development of their knowledge, understanding, skills and values for practice. A reflective approach to practice is also consistent with the expectation of continuing professional development and the view that knowledge and skill development is never complete but should always be in a process of further improvement, (NISCC, 2004). Given their distinctive value base and commitment to anti-oppressive practice, there is an expectation that social workers will be prepared not only to be challenged, but also to be challenging in working to empower and transform the lives of others (Davies & Leonard, 2004; Fook, 2004).

Although the requirement to demonstrate reflection in practice is now an expectation at all levels of social work education in the UK, it remains rather ill defined and there continues to be a lack of clarity about the characteristics of thought, feeling and action, which serve to differentiate standards (Ixer, 1999). Fook (2004), for example,

has observed the variety of terms including, reflective practice, critical self-reflectivity and critical reflection which are often used interchangeably but in fact have different meanings, are informed by different ideas and stem from different intellectual traditions. Ixer (1999) has argued that this lack of clarity creates confusion and poses dangers for vulnerable learners by increasing the power imbalance with assessors who are unclear themselves about what is actually being assessed. Given this situation some authors have questioned whether assessment of reflection in practice is fair or valid (Maich *et al.*, 2000). It has also been argued that it is important for educators to consider to what extent the nature of practice contexts and working environments either facilitate or inhibit the reflective process (Newton, 1999; Thompson, 2006). A number of studies have highlighted the variety of personal, structural, and cultural obstacles that can affect student's ability to reflect effectively on their practice (Douglas & Wilson, 1996; Thompson, 2006). These include, not just lack of analytical ability, theoretical knowledge or the student's willingness to admit limitations, but also the availability of supportive learning environments and good supervision (Douglas & Wilson, 1996; Thompson, 2006).

The research context

Northern Ireland, in comparison with other parts of the UK, is thought to enjoy a number of distinct advantages in workplace learning provision for social work students (McCarthy & Walker, 1994; Wilson, 2000). Together with a well-organized infrastructure and good quality learning opportunities in a range of service user group settings, Northern Ireland is felt to have a well-qualified pool of practice teachers engaged in supervising and supporting students undertaking workplace learning (Wilson, 2000). A large majority of practice teachers in Northern Ireland, who are usually experienced qualified social workers, hold a post qualifying award in workplace learning. Their training places a considerable emphasis on adult learning theory and developing the skills necessary for facilitating the learning process, including helping students reflect on and learn from their practice experience (Wilson, 2000).

The MSW Course at Queen's, which was replaced in 2004 by a three-year bachelor of social work course, was a two-year competence-based postgraduate programme of education and training. The MSW programme consisted of a mix of generic and specialist teaching with the aim of preparing students for professional practice as qualified social workers. Workplace learning was an integral part of the programme, which included two assessed practice placements in different social work agencies, both of 70 days duration. As part of the assessment of workplace learning students were required to produce a portfolio of written evidence which included for example, agency contact records, process records and evaluations of work with service users, assessment reports and court reports, etc. The aim was for students to demonstrate competence in a number of key aspects of social work practice including communicating and engaging, promoting and enabling, assessing needs and working effectively with other disciplines in carrying out interventions with service users (CCETSW, 1992). In addition to written self-evaluations and reflections on individual pieces of evidence contained

in their portfolio, students completed a final self-evaluation report reflecting on how their competence had developed. Practice teachers, responsible for supervising and supporting students undertaking workplace learning placements, made a pass/fail recommendation of their competence based on their direct observation and assessment of all the evidence. There was normally a very high pass rate for students undertaking workplace learning in the MSW programme and during the period in which the research was undertaken, for example, the fail rate averaged between 3% and 5%.

Research aims and methodology

This study was undertaken with postgraduate MSW students at Queen's University, Belfast. It included three cohorts of students undertaking first and second workplace learning opportunities in a range of voluntary and statutory agencies during the period 2001 to 2004. The study aims to be of contemporary interest in informing current debate about the significance of reflective practice in workplace learning. While the practice illustrations are drawn from social work in Northern Ireland it is hoped that the findings should be of significance both for other social work programmes and professional education programmes in other disciplines in which workplace learning and reflective practice are significant features. The specific aims and objectives of the research were to:

- To explore the student's perspective and experience of reflecting on practice in workplace learning.
- To identify student's perceptions of the strengths and limitations of the supervision and support they received in reflecting on their practice.
- To consider the implications of the findings for developing reflective practice in workplace learning in social work and professional training programmes

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to help ensure the reliability and validity of the data collected from students. The primary instrument was a questionnaire consisting of four sections with 54 items including open-ended, multiple-choice and closed questions. In the first section, recipients were asked closed questions about their age, gender, previous experience, and qualifications. Recipients were then asked to complete both open ended and multiple choice questions about various aspects of their experience of reflective practice including their satisfaction with how their learning had been facilitated and their perception of the overall level of competence they had achieved in this aspect of professional development. One hundred and thirty-nine (70%) of MSW students participated in the research by completing the questionnaire. The data from the questionnaires was pre coded and structured into categories to facilitate analysis using SPSS version 10 for Windows computer package.

The questionnaire was piloted at a group interview undertaken with 12 students to help ensure that the questions were pertinent and reflected the student's perspective of their experience. In order to further enhance the quality and depth of the data collected from the questionnaire its preliminary findings were shared with 12 students

who had completed placements, during a further group interview. Content analysis was used to evaluate the information and views collected from this source and served to further highlight a number of significant issues and concerns relating to the student's experience of reflective practice.

Reflective practice in the workplace is a complex phenomenon and student's experience in this area might be affected by a variety of different variables. The main limitations of this study is that it focused only on student's perceptions and did not include consideration of the views of practice teachers, tutors and others who play a significant role in workplace learning and may be instrumental in facilitating students reflective practice and learning. However, social work student's experience of reflective practice has been under-researched and it is argued that it is important to develop an understanding of their perceptions. At the same time, it is acknowledged that consideration of other variables, including the input of practice teachers and others, and the relationship between such factors and student learning outcomes, could provide a more comprehensive analysis.

Findings

Sample characteristics

Over four fifths of MSW students (84%) were female and over two thirds (69%) were aged under 30-years-old. Only 9% of students were aged 40-years-old or over. The undergraduate degrees, held by all students in the sample, were mainly in social science subjects, particularly sociology and psychology. Twenty-two students held postgraduate qualifications, including eight students with a masters degree and two with a Ph.D. Fifty-nine per cent of students had other paid employment when undertaking workplace learning during the MSW course and 49% of this total worked between 10 and 20 hours per week and 17% worked more than 20 hours a week throughout their placements.

Satisfaction with learning opportunities and supervision from practice teachers

The largest number of students (42%) were placed in fieldwork settings, 28% in residential and 17% in day care settings. Students were placed with a variety of service user groups including 22.5% in family and childcare, 22.5% with people with learning disabilities and the remainder worked in a number of other programmes including mental health (13.8%), older people (12.5%), physical health and disability (11.3%) and criminal justice (8.3%). The majority, of students (55%) were undertaking their first work placements, 45% were on second placements and one student was undertaking a repeat second placement. A large majority of students (87%) were either satisfied or very satisfied with the learning opportunities provided to them and only a very small number (3%) expressed dissatisfaction.

As indicated in Table 1 over two thirds of students were either satisfied or very satisfied with the supervision and support they had received from practice teachers in

Table 1. Satisfaction with practice teacher’s supervision and support in helping to develop ability to reflect

Satisfaction level	% of students
Very satisfied	41
Satisfied	33
Neither satisfied or dissatisfied	8
Dissatisfied	9
Very dissatisfied	9

helping to them to reflect on practice. However, a significant minority were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with this aspect of their experience.

A number of students commented very positively on the value of supervision in helping them to reflect on and learn from their experience in developing their practice. Typical comments included the following:

I found supervision with my practice teacher excellent in enabling me to identify relevant theories and legislation and for providing opportunities to reflect constructively on my practice. I felt that this enabled me to constantly look deeper at my practice and really learn from it.

Students dissatisfied with the supervision they received in this area tended to highlight a lack of support and constructive feedback from practice teachers as inhibiting factors: ‘My practice teacher did not give me very much feed back—very little guidance on the layout of portfolio and especially self-reflection’.

A final year student was able to compare and contrast different experiences of receiving feedback during their two periods of workplace learning:

Second year placement, excellent practice teacher who was committed to helping me develop my reflecting and practice skills—first year practice teacher—very scant on feedback and general support

Adult learning and student learning styles

A number of writers have highlighted the importance of adhering to adult learning principles as an integral part of the process of helping students to develop their ability to reflect on practice (Gardiner, 1989; Thompson, 2006). Through valuing previous knowledge and experience, it has been argued that practice teachers can play a very significant role in helping students to make meaningful connections with current experience and develop new knowledge and skills (Gardiner, 1989; Thompson, 2006). Reassuringly, the majority of students felt they had always (60%) or often (17%) been treated as an adult learner during workplace learning. While 18% felt that they had sometimes been treated as an adult learner, very few students felt they had seldom (4%) or never (1%) been treated in this way. Once again, the quality of support from practice teachers and others coupled with openness in giving feedback

about performance seems to have been particularly important. For example, as one student stated: ‘My practice teacher and on-site (supervisor) were always open and honest with me, especially during challenging periods’.

In contrast, negative relationships with practice teachers seemed to reinforce anxieties and adversely affect the learning process including the student’s ability to reflect on practice: ‘Practice teacher/student relationship reduced my self-confidence and ability to articulate my personal learning and development’.

It has been argued that personal learning style is an important factor which needs to be taken into account in facilitating the reflective learning process (Gardiner, 1989; Thompson, 2006). In Northern Ireland MSW students would normally complete a learning style’s questionnaire during workplace learning, often in conjunction with practice teachers (Honey & Mumford, 1982). Table 2 indicates the range of personal learning styles students most identified with following their placement.

As might be expected some students identified with more than one personal learning style. However, as can be seen from Table 2 the overwhelming majority of students identified ‘reflector’ as their predominant learning style and only 3.6% of students were not able to identify themselves with any learning style. The finding that most students are ‘reflectors’, during workplace learning might suggest that they are already well ‘tuned-in’ and receptive to reflective practice and the demands and learning expectations associated with it.

Students were asked whether their personal learning style was utilized to facilitate their learning during supervision sessions with their practice teacher. A large majority of students (67%) stated that it had been used in supervision. However, a significant minority of students (23%) reported that their learning style had not been used in supervision and a further 9% were unsure. Students tended to have mixed feelings about the value of sharing their personal learning style with practice teachers. For example, one student identified the mutual benefit of sharing knowledge of learning styles in order to avoid a situation where both practice teacher and student were spending too long focusing on theorizing/reflecting in supervision rather than getting on with actual practice: ‘It did help this year in that it was identified where we were both coming from—we were both seen as theorists and reflectors and it was important not to just talk—but bring it back to action’.

Other students were more sceptical about the value of this exercise or felt it had not always been clear why it was being carried out: ‘I don’t know how reliable it is—it depends what mood you are in. I just didn’t feel that either party really understood why we were doing this’.

Table 2. Student learning styles

Learning style	% of students
Reflector	78%
Pragmatist	20%
Theorist	27%
Activist	23%

The relationship between reflective practice and the competence-based/portfolio approach to learning

On the positive side, a large majority (80%) of students were satisfied that the competence-based criteria used to assess their practice had been clear or very clear. Sixteen per cent were unclear and only 3% were very unclear about assessment criteria. However, students generally expressed quite negative views about what they felt was the mechanical and sometimes repetitive nature of the programmes competence-based/portfolio approach to workplace learning. In particular, many students expressed concern that, given the relatively short duration of the placement, an over-emphasis on producing written evidence of competence and written reflections on evidence had inhibited their learning and limited the time available for direct practice with service users.

Typical comments included the following: ‘Portfolio is a huge task and hindered the last half of placement—so focused on portfolio that you ruin some excellent learning opportunities’.

Other than written evaluations, relatively few students had experienced practice teachers using alternative approaches such as videotapes (14%) or audiotapes (9%) to facilitate learning and encourage reflection on their practice.

In order to further explore the relationship between reflective practice and competence-based learning students were asked to identify how frequently they were expected to produce written reflective evaluations on their practice for supervision purposes with their practice teachers. While nearly two thirds of students (61.3%) reported that they were often or always expected to produce these, 23.8% stated only sometimes and 13.8% said seldom or never (See Table 3).

Many students expressed frustration at what they saw as significant variations and unnecessary duplication in the quality and quantity of written reflective work practice teachers had expected them to produce:

At the end of the day it is a pass or fail, it just needs to cross the line—you can read another portfolio and sometimes the work is at a different level. I just found I was repeating myself, there is an analysis of individual pieces of evidence, then there is an evaluation of packages then there is the same evaluation in the self evaluation report.

As indicated above a number of students expressed concern about what they felt was an over-reliance on the written medium in meeting programme requirements to

Table 3. Requirement to produce written reflective evaluations

Frequency	% of students
Always	27.5
Often	33.8
Sometimes	23.8
Seldom	6.3
Never	7.5

demonstrate reflective practice. 'Portfolio suits people who have enhanced writing skills especially in regard to reflecting/evaluating'.

A guiding principle of social work education and training is that practice, at all levels, should be firmly grounded in social work values such as respect for the service user, a non judgemental approach, confidentiality, promoting self-determination, etc, and that students should be able to clearly reflect on and develop these values in their practice (Thompson, 2006). In this survey, students were asked to rank order the most important factors they felt had guided their practice. It was reassuring that 49% of students identified social work values as the single most important factor guiding their practice. However, it was concerning that students rated both anti-oppressive practice (14%) and social work theory (14%) much lower as guiding factors than agency policy and procedures (33%). The main concern underlying these responses is that whereas practice guided by social work values, anti oppressive practice and social work theory might be considered factors likely to promote reflection in practice a reliance on agency policy and procedures has been associated, in the UK context, with generating a non-reflective approach (Pietroni, 1995; Yelloly & Henkel, 1995). Finally, some students felt that the requirements to demonstrate the competences specified in the programme could also detract attention from other key learning areas such as anti-oppressive practice (AOP). For example, as one student pointed out: 'AOP is not specifically in the practice requirements (competences) it almost has to be tacked on—it is everywhere and no-where'.

Reflective practice outcomes

The overwhelming majority of students achieved a satisfactory pass standard in workplace learning with only a 3–5% failure rate during the period when the research was conducted. Nonetheless, levels of anxiety among students about outcomes were generally higher than one would have expected from this pass rate. Forty-nine per cent of students reported that their anxiety levels in this area were high to very high, 29% medium, 17% low and only 3% had very low anxiety. As indicated earlier, student's concerns and anxieties about outcomes tended to focus on the production of the portfolio of evidence of competence rather than their actual practice with service users. Typical comments included the following: 'It is an enormous piece of work in a very short piece of time. This places the student under immense stress and pressure'.

Comments from students indicated that supervision and support from practice teachers had generally been very helpful in helping them to deal with such anxieties. The following was a typical comment: 'I felt very supported throughout my placement as my practice teacher was on site and made herself available when needed'.

However, for a small number of students who had experienced relationship difficulties with practice teachers, the supervision process seems to have been counterproductive in fuelling anxieties and negatively affecting the learning process: 'Tension in the relationship with practice teacher—not enough recognition of my

Table 4. Clarity about strengths and future learning needs

Level of clarity	% of students
Very clear	38
Clear	49
Unclear	12
Very unclear	1

ability to self-reflect. It was a nightmare and very stressful. Got there eventually but it was unnecessary stress’.

Students were also asked to indicate how satisfied they were with the opportunities available during workplace learning to develop their reflective practice skills. Nearly two-thirds of students reported that this aspect of their workplace learning experience had either been satisfying (32) or most satisfying (29). While 18% were unsure, only a small minority felt this aspect of their learning had been dissatisfying (7%) or very dissatisfying (5%). In order to measure student’s perceptions of how they rated their own ability to critically reflect on their practice they were asked to state to what extent they were clear at the end of workplace learning about their strengths and future learning needs (see Table 4).

Reassuringly, as indicated in Table 4 the majority of students were either clear or very clear about strengths and future learning needs and only a relatively small number were unclear or very unclear. When asked to state whether they felt their practice teacher had enabled them to become more self-directing 74% of students answered yes, 13% were unsure and 12% answered no.

Discussion

It is clear from the findings of this research that MSW students at Queen’s were a very well qualified and experienced group who were able during the course to avail of a wide range of workplace learning opportunities with a variety of service user groups. The findings indicate that most students were satisfied with the learning opportunities provided during workplace learning to develop their reflective practice skills and professional social work competence. However, the results also underline the importance from the student’s perspective of the need for good supervision and a supportive working relationship with practice teachers to enable them to reflect and develop their knowledge and skills (Doel & Shardlow, 1996; Lefevre, 2005; Thompson, 2006). Overall, the findings from this study tend to confirm that standards of practice teaching supervision and support in Northern Ireland are generally very satisfactory (Rea, 1994; Wilson, 2000). While most MSW students were satisfied with the supervision and support they had received in facilitating their reflective practice the finding that a minority were not is concerning and suggests there is scope for more consistent standards in this area. However, research involving other key players in workplace learning including, for example, practice teachers, tutors,

and on-site supervisors (where appropriate), would be required to investigate this matter more comprehensively.

It was reassuring that most MSW students felt that they were respected as adult learners during workplace learning and that their personal learning style was being taken into account by supervisors in facilitating their professional development (Thompson, 2006). Significantly, this study found that most MSW students identified with the 'reflector' learning style. There might be a number of reasons to explain this phenomenon. For example, it is likely that the overall professional socialization students experienced on the MSW programme, which strongly encouraged a reflective and critical approach to practice, may have been a significant contributing factor in generating an orientation towards this particular learning style. (It would be interesting to investigate more fully the factors which contribute to students acquiring a reflective learning style and whether participants in other social work programmes and also other professional education programmes have similar learning profiles). Whatever the reasons, the evidence that many students are already in 'reflective mode' and therefore more receptive to reflecting on their practice is likely to be a positive factor in facilitating their learning. However, it was evident that some students were sceptical about the value and utility of discussing and exploring their learning styles in supervision. In addition, the finding that some students also had less positive experiences of being treated as adult learners in the supervision process would suggest that there is room for development in how adult learning principles and tools such as learning style questionnaires are utilized by practice teachers in supervision.

Overall, the findings from this research indicated a problematic relationship between the MSW programmes portfolio approach to students demonstrating and evidencing competence and the development of a more reflective approach to learning. At one level the results seem to confirm the view that competence based approaches tend to be rather mechanical and repetitive in nature and are therefore antagonistic to a more thoughtful reflective approach to learning (Pietroni, 1995; Yelloly & Henkel, 1995). The results of this study which identified the factors most influential in guiding student's practice also lend support to Houston and McCullough's (2001) argument that social work in Northern Ireland, particularly in the statutory sector, has developed a procedurally led culture that may be harmful to the development of practice informed by a strong knowledge and theory base. What is clear from this study is that competence-based approaches which focus on evidence gathering at the expense of learning are likely to limit student's capacity for benefiting from a reflective approach. One of the main problems identified by students was the volume of evidence required to demonstrate competence in workplace learning coupled with the relatively short time available to produce it. Taken together, these features of workplace learning appeared to limit the amount of time and space for reflection. Given these pressures and the fact that many students were engaged in paid employment on top of their work placements it is perhaps not surprising that many found the experience difficult and stressful. Students were also critical of the volume and duplication of written reflective work required by the MSW programme

and inconsistencies between practice teachers in their expectations of students in this area. This finding provides further evidence to support Ixer's (1999) argument about the lack of clarity surrounding standards of reflection in social work education and reinforces the need to ensure greater consistency and transparency in this area as the new BSW is developed.

Wilson *et al.* (2005) have argued that competence-based learning and reflective practice can both be built into the design of educational programmes in such a way that they can complement each other as, for example, in the Northern Ireland approved social work post-qualifying education programme. While the new undergraduate BSW is still essentially competence-based it also includes a number of features that might help to facilitate reflective practice (NISCC, 2004). For example, the duration of workplace learning in the BSW has been extended—85 and 100 days respectively—and therefore should allow more time and space for reflection. Nevertheless, Preston-Shoot (2004) has questioned whether the competence-based approach adopted in the new BSW, which now focuses on student's providing evidence of their competence in carrying out a range of key social work roles, is any more streamlined than the old portfolio approach. The lesson from this research is that in developing the new BSW it will be important for educators to ensure that programme evidence requirements do not place an undue burden on students and sufficient space is allowed for reflection and learning.

The overwhelming majority of MSW students in this research study achieved a pass standard in workplace learning. Although the programme did not differentiate standards of reflective practice in terms of final grades, which were simply pass or fail, the results suggested that most students achieved good outcomes in a range of reflective practice outcome indicators. For example, it is very positive that the large majority of students could evaluate their professional strengths and limitations and that most were either clear or very clear about their future learning needs. Gardiner (1989) has argued that becoming self-directing in relation to one's own learning is a very significant component of professional development requiring a high level of ability to self-evaluate and reflect on practice. Therefore, the results of this study are very positive in that nearly three quarters of MSW students felt they had been enabled to become more self-directing in their learning.

Students undertaking workplace learning inhabit a rather vulnerable and disempowered position with not only educational goals but also future career prospects at stake depending on whether they achieve a satisfactory standard of practice. Reflective practice is a highly personal aspect of workplace learning and it was a worrying finding in this study that many students experienced such high levels of anxiety. The results lend support to Gambrill's (1997) argument that engaging in reflection that involves challenge to individual values and skills can evoke considerable anxiety and threat. Thus, while reflection might be positively beneficial from a learning perspective it also can have unforeseen costs for students. The high level of stress and anxiety reported in this study clearly reinforces the need to ensure that students receive high quality supervision and support in reflecting on their practice.

Conclusion

A reflective approach to social work practice provides an important complement to competence-based forms of learning and helps to avoid what could otherwise become an arid quest for superficial proficiency in technical knowledge and skills. This research was reassuring in that it was evident that MSW social work students generally had sufficient opportunities for reflection and were well supported by practice teachers in developing their professional skills. Although the research provided evidence of effective learning outcomes for students across a range of factors associated with a reflective approach to practice it also indicated areas that could be further improved in the development of the new BSW degree. More generally, the results suggest that professional education programmes need to provide students with adequate time and space to reflect on and learn from their experience of workplace learning. As evidenced in this research, professional education programmes also need to ensure that students are provided with high quality supervision and support to assist them in coping with the challenges and anxieties which reflection can engender and to help empower them to transform themselves and their own professional practice in working to empower others.

Notes on contributors

George Wilson (corresponding author) is a lecturer in Social Work at Queen's University, Belfast where he is involved in qualifying and post qualifying training and research into mental health social work and education. Prior to moving to Queen's University in 2000, George was employed as a practice teacher and lead trainer in mental health with the Southern Health and Social Services Board in Northern Ireland.

Dr Trish Walsh is Director of the masters in social work programme in the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin. Trish's previous experience was in social work practice and as a practice teacher and tutor, before joining Trinity, initially as fieldwork co-ordinator in 1992.

Margaret Kirby was, at the time of the research, fieldwork co-ordinator and lecturer in social work in the School of Social Work and Social Policy in Trinity College Dublin.

References

- CCETSW (1992) Guidance on approval of agencies providing practice learning opportunities. Paper 26.3, CCETSW, London.
- Davies, L. & Leonard, P. (2004) *Social work in a corporate era: practices of power and resistance* (Aldershot, Ashgate).
- Doel, M. & Shardlow, S. (1996) *Social work in a changing world: an international perspective on practice learning* (Aldershot, Ashgate).
- Fook, J. (2004) Critical reflection and transformative possibilities, in: L. Davies & P. Leonard (Eds) *Social work in a corporate era: practices of power and resistance* (Aldershot, Ashgate).

- Gambrill E (1997) *Social work practice, a critical thinkers guide* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- Gardiner, D. (1989) *The anatomy of supervision: developing learning and professional competence for social work students* (Buckingham, SRHE).
- Gould, N. & Taylor, I. (Eds) (1996) *Reflective learning for social work* (Aldershot, Ashgate).
- GSCC (2002) *Code of practice for social care workers and code of practice for employers of social care workers* (London, General Social Care Council).
- Ixer, G. (1999) There's no such thing as reflection, *British Journal of Social Work*, 29, 513–527.
- Honey, P. & Mumford, A. (1982) *Manual of learning styles* (London, P. Honey).
- Houston, S. & McCullough, W. (2001) Introduction, in: S. Houston & W. McCullough (Eds) *Social work and innovation: an anthology of advanced level practice* (Belfast, CCETSW).
- Lefevre, M. (2005) Facilitating practice learning assessment: the influence of relationship, *Social Work Education*, 24(5), 565–583.
- Maich, N. M., Brown, B. & Royal, J. (2000) Becoming' through reflection and professional portfolios: the voice of growth in nurses, *Reflective Practice*, 1(3), 309–324.
- McCarthy, P. & Walker, J. (1994) *CCETSW: UK audit of practice placements 1992–1993* (Newcastle, University of Newcastle).
- Newton, J. (2004) Learning to reflect: a journey, *Reflective Practice*, 5(2), 155–166.
- NISCC (2004) *Training to be a social worker in Northern Ireland* (Belfast, Northern Ireland Social Care Council).
- Pietroni, M. (1995) The nature and aims of professional education for social workers. A postmodern perspective, in: M. Yelloly & M. Henkel (Eds) *Learning and teaching in social work: towards reflective practice* (London, Jessica Kingsley).
- Preston-Shoot, M. (2004) Responding by degrees: surveying the education and practice landscape, *Social Work Education*, 23(6), 667–692.
- Rea, E (1994) *Practice placements study* (Northern Ireland, Department of Health and Social Services).
- Ruch, G. (2002) From triangle to spiral: reflective practice in social work education, practice and research, *Social Work Education*, 21(2), 199–216.
- Schön, D. (1983) *Educating the reflective practitioner: how professionals think in action* (New York, Basic Books).
- Sheldon, B. (2001) The validity of evidence-based practice in social work: a reply to Stephen Webb, *British Journal of Social Work*, 31, 801–809.
- Thompson, N. (2006) *Promoting workplace learning* (Bristol, The Policy Press).
- Webb, S. A. (2001) Some considerations on the validity of evidence-based practice in social work, *British Journal of Social Work*, 31, 57–79.
- Wilson, G. (2000) Developing practice learning: the practice teacher's perspective, *Journal of Practice Teaching in Health and Social Work*, 3(2), 44–62.
- Wilson, G., Hamilton, B., Britton F., Campbell, J., Hughes, P. & Manktelow, R. (2005) Approved social work training in Northern Ireland: using research to examine competence-based learning and influence policy change, *Social Work Education*, 24(7), 723–738.
- Yelloly, M. & Henkel, M. (1995) *Learning and teaching in social work, towards reflective practice* (London, Jessica Kingsley).