Reflexive Practice Learning as the Potential to Become a Competent Future Practitioner

Tadeja Kodele*[1] and Nina Mešl[2]

∽　　The article presents an example of social work education, in which reflexive practice learning was used to help students work competently in professional practice. Within an action research project, new forms of mentoring support for students working with families facing multiple challenges were developed as part of their practice learning. This paper presents the results of a qualitative analysis of the students' reflections on mentoring meetings. Content analysis was used for data analysis. The analysis shows that practice learning should be framed as a reflexive dialogue between mentors and students. Students need opportunities to share experiences and expand their knowledge with other students in small mentoring groups. The continuous and concrete support that the mentoring group provided to the students in practice enabled them to deal with the sense of uncertainty that often arises in collaborative processes of help.

Keywords: mentoring, practice learning, reflexive approach, theory of social work

....
1　*Corresponding Author. Faculty of Social Work, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia;
　　tadeja.kodele@fsd.uni-lj.si.
2　Faculty of Social Work, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Refleksivno praktično učenje kot priložnost za prihodnje kompetentno delo v praksi

Tadeja Kodele in Nina Mešl

∿   Članek predstavlja primer izobraževanja na področju socialnega dela, v katerem je bil poudarek na refleksivnem praktičnem učenju kot pomoč študentkam in študentom za kompetentno delo v praksi. V okviru akcijskega raziskovalnega projekta smo kot del praktičnega učenja razvili nove oblike mentorske podpore študentkam in študentom, ki so sodelovali z družinami s številnimi izzivi. V članku so predstavljeni izsledki kvalitativne analize refleksij mentorskih srečanj. Za analizo podatkov smo uporabili vsebinsko analizo. Ta je pokazala, da je treba praktično učenje oblikovati kot refleksivni dialog med mentoricami in mentorji ter študentkami in študenti. Študentke in študenti potrebujejo priložnosti za izmenjavo izkušenj in razvijanje znanja z drugimi študentkami in študenti v majhnih mentorskih skupinah. Kontinuirana in konkretna podpora, ki jo je mentorska skupina zagotavljala študentkam in študentom na praksi, jim je omogočila, da so se spopadli z občutki negotovosti, ki se pogosto pojavljajo v sodelovalnih procesih pomoči.

Ključne besede: mentorstvo, praktično učenje, refleksivni pristop, teorija socialnega dela

Introduction

It has always been a challenge to provide an education that equips students for their future careers. Both the social sciences and the natural sciences are concerned with this (Bates 2007; Bogo, 2010; Garcia-Aracil et al., 2021; Hernandez-March et al., 2009). In the present article, an example of education at Faculty of Social Work, University of Ljubljana (hereafter: FSW) is presented. The thesis is that social work cannot be learned simply from books, while practical experience without theoretical knowledge is also insufficient. Many authors (Bogo, 2010; Burton, 2015; Kourgiantakis et al., 2018; Sicora, 2019) point out that social work students consider practice learning as one of the most important components of education to prepare them for the transition to the world of work. Several studies (e.g., Trede et al. 2012, Engelbertink et al., 2022) also find that practice learning is the most critical factor in strengthening students' professional identity. However, Shulman (1998) notes that the responsibility of developing professionals is not only to apply what they learn to practice, but to transform, adapt, blend, synthesise, critique and invent practice in order to move from the theoretical and research-based knowledge of the academy to the kind of clinical practice knowledge required for professional practice.

The question of how to support social work students during their studies to ensure that they have sufficient knowledge for competent fieldwork has been on the minds of those who design the study process and practice learning for many years. Simply increasing the number of practice hours during the social work programme is no guarantee that students will be truly equipped to work competently in the field. More important are the opportunities they receive to learn in practice (Papouli, 2014; Parker, 2007). A variety of strategies are being or have been used in social work programmes to address this issue, e.g., audio/video recording of practice sessions in class (Asakura et al., 2018), field seminars (Fortune et al., 2018) and the inclusion of service users in training (Mackay & Millar, 2012). The theme of supporting students to competently conduct social work with families facing multiple challenges has also guided the way we have designed practice learning, first as part of the project Helping Families in the Community: Co-Creation of Desired Changes for Reducing Social Exclusion and Strengthening Health, and then after its completion. While there are many ways in which social work programmes attempt to deal with this issue, the context of practice learning, supported by reflexive dialogue about one's experiences, use of theoretical knowledge, etc., provides opportunities to develop a professional working framework as a foundation for becoming a competent reflexive practitioner.

The present article begins with an overview of the reflexive approach and its importance for the development of practice learning in social work. By analysing the collected material on faculty mentor[3] support for students, the empirical part of the article seeks to identify the types of support students need during their practice learning in order to work effectively with families who face multiple challenges in social work practice.

The need to develop new knowledge and use knowledge reflexively in social work

The gap between theory and practice in social work has received considerable attention in research and is a frequent topic of discussion in social work (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Clapton et al., 2008; Mešl, 2008; Parton & O'Byrne, 2000). This discrepancy arises primarily from the difference between what social work students learn in their studies and what they experience and witness while working in the field. It often seems that theory development is the exclusive province of academics and practice development is the province of practitioners (Shulman 1998; Thompson, 2000). Yet, if social work as an applied science is truly to serve its fundamental goal of improving the situation of people seeking help, collaborative dialogue between theory and practice must be established. In linking theory and practice, the concept of reflexivity has become increasingly important in social work (D'Cruz et al., 2007; Healy, 2005; Mešl, 2008; Taylor & White, 2000), especially as it relates to working with uncertainty (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000). In the literature, there are different definitions and uses of the terms reflexive and reflective.[4] In the present article, we use Taylor and White's (2000) definition of reflexivity. Our focus in the project was the application and development of social work knowledge in practice. We wanted to address the so-called theory-practice gap that has existed in the field of social work for far too long. Unfortunately, it is still the case that, for various reasons, social workers refrain from the explicit use of knowledge in practice; the use of concepts, guidelines and strategies seems to be only partial and unreflective, and it is supplemented by non-professional, often prevailing

---

3   There are various terms for mentors at the faculty and in field placement: supervisors, instructors, mentors, advisors. In this article, we use the term faculty mentor for the mentor at the faculty and field mentor for the mentor in field placement.

4   For example, according to social work authors Fook and Gardner (2007), to be reflexive is to understand that all human aspects, including physical condition and psychological states, age, past experiences, social position and culture, influence the way knowledge is perceived and created. Thus, being a reflexive practitioner means deliberately and continuously questioning oneself (in terms of perception, interpretation, decision-making, values, feelings, actions, etc.) about the assumptions that underlie one's knowledge in social work and how one uses it in the context of academic and practice learning.

common-sense approaches, giving the impression that the boundaries between the profession of social work and the various informal forms of psychosocial support are blurred (Čačinovič Vogrinčič & Šugman Bohinc, 2000). We recognised a way to bridge this gap in a reflexive turn to the application and development of knowledge (after Taylor & White, 2000). This approach emphasises the fact that we use formal theory in practice but are also actively involved in its creation. It is not about simply applying theoretical knowledge, but about reflexively and consciously using and extending it (Mešl, 2008). According to our understanding, in this process the social worker constructs the existing theoretical knowledge for herself in such a way that it can form a clear basis for her work; she can articulate her work and also contribute to new insights and further knowledge development. We wanted to encourage this process in students.

Schön (1991) made the assumption that competent practitioners generally know more than they can tell about their work. We believe that this assumption also applies to social work: competent social workers generally know more about the quality of social work practice than they can verbalise. Thus, social work needs to take a step forward. We need knowledge and words to describe our work, to express to our users what we are doing and what our next step will be, so that we can explore all of the possible steps with them. Only in this way we can ensure their participation in work processes that lead to desired outcomes. These work processes are good because we have created them together with people, with experts from experiences (Mešl, 2008).

Figure 1 shows the conditions for reflexive learning that we create with a circular process of learning and knowledge development. We believe that this is necessary in the study of social work and in the daily practice of every social worker. Figure 1 may appear to be related to Kolb's model (1984), but our model has slightly different emphases. We start from the assumption that competent practice requires theoretical knowledge on which the practitioner relies in a concrete practical situation. It is important to help the practitioner to reflect on practical experience in relation to theoretical knowledge, in order to help them to make tacit knowledge as explicit as possible, to articulate their knowledge and to take a step away from the so-called common-sense approach. The focus is on reflecting on theoretical knowledge and an approach based on established theoretical concepts, as well as developing new knowledge and new approaches in practice.

Figure 1

The circular process of theoretical and practical upgrading of knowledge
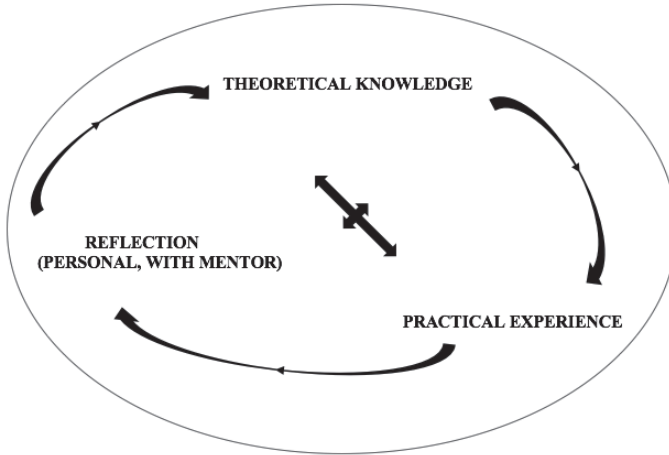
The need to reflect on our own practice and develop new knowledge to enable social workers to co-create new responses to people's everyday challenges becomes even more evident when we work with families who face multiple challenges. Social work with a family is considered a complex area of work, with complexity resulting primarily from the intertwining of the different issues, levels and realities that a social worker and the family or family members encounter during the processes of co-creating social work solutions. Complexity also results from the fact that social workers do not have predetermined answers to the desired outcomes of a family or its members, as the desired outcomes have yet to be co-created (Čačinovič Vogrinčič & Mešl, 2019). Families facing multiple challenges are those who face a variety of external and internal stressors and problems in their daily lives (e.g., poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, school failure, violence, addiction), all of which increase the complexity of social work with families. This creates new challenges for social workers. Due to the accumulation of various types of distress that a family must cope with, social workers often feel helpless and incompetent, lose contact with the family due to overwhelming emotional stress, or lose their vision, hope and direction for further work with the family (Madsen, 2007).

Practice learning of social work students as part of the project Helping Families in the Community

Based on the distress that social workers often experience when working with families facing multiple challenges and the assumption that very little attention has been devoted to analysing social work students' practice learning (Noble, 2001), we explored how to help students work competently with families as part of the project Helping Families in the Community. FSW has recognised that practice learning is essential to working in practice. At the undergraduate level, learning outcomes are gradually increased from the first to the fourth year of study (e.g., in terms of the tasks and obligations students are expected to perform in practice, in terms of autonomy when working with users). In the first year, students 'shadow' a social worker, while in the fourth year they are expected to perform certain tasks autonomously. In the first and second years of undergraduate study, students are required to complete 100 hours of practicum. Students work with a user (or group of users) approximately once a week. In the third (240 hours) and fourth (160 hours) years of study, practice must be completed in one block. In each academic year, a student has two mentors: a field mentor and a faculty mentor. The field mentors are experienced social workers whose role is to support students in their fieldwork, teach them about field placement work and introduce them to actual work with users. The role of faculty mentors is to prepare students for fieldwork, to help them reflect on and evaluate their experiences, and to link theory and practice. At FSW, students are divided into mentoring groups (about 15 students), each led by a faculty mentor. Practice learning in the master's programme is designed to provide students with the knowledge and practice experience necessary for independent professional social work. Each student completes 80 hours of practice in their chosen practice placement (social work centres, schools, nursing homes, etc.).

It has been our experience that, while field mentors may be excellent and experienced practitioners, this does not make them good practice teachers, especially when it comes to supporting students for the reflexive application of knowledge to practice. This is the experience we want our students to have in the project Helping Families in the Community. The innovative aspect of the project was that students went from being observers of social workers who were occasionally involved in the processes of supporting and helping people, to collaborating independently with families without the presence of a field mentor. They independently carried out individual working projects of help (hereafter: IWPH), drawing on the theoretical knowledge they had acquired and looking for ways to maintain the working relationship with the family. During this process, they

received support from their faculty mentor. Student support involved a reflexive approach to applying knowledge to practice (Healy, 2005) based on reflection on theory and experience in practice. The project aimed to overcome the disconnect between theory and practice so that students apply and test theory (described in lectures) in practice, as it is often the case (Bogo, 2010) that students do not know how to apply theory learned in lectures to practice. Students and faculty mentors met regularly every 14 days in small mentoring groups (max. six students per group), explored the applicability of theoretical knowledge in practice, and actively participated in generating new knowledge. Eight mentoring groups were formed during the project, each led by a faculty mentor. Each meeting consisted of three phases: introduction (creating a context for collaboration); the core working phase (where we addressed students' experiences and the dilemmas of working with the family); and the conclusion of the meeting (summarising the agreements, personal reflection on the meeting). The way the mentoring group was managed was based on the concept of a working relationship of co-creation. This represented clear support for the work of the mentors, while also providing an experience for the students on how to structure meeting with families, as we believe that this concept is useful for supporting families (Čačinovič Vogrinčič & Mešl, 2019). At the same time, it is useful for practitioners for supervision conversations (see more in Videmšek, 2021).

As this way of practice learning proved to be effective in supporting students during the project, we continued with it after the project ended. The continuation was, however, on a smaller scale (only one or two mentoring groups per academic year), as we were unable to obtain funding in the current education system and the work of the faculty mentors was entirely voluntary, that is, in addition to their other professional commitments.

The introductory section already raised the question of the quality of field education, which is not necessarily related to quantity. Moreover, analysis of the results of three focus groups[5] with students who participated in the project Helping Families in the Community clearly showed that, although the number of hours devoted to practice learning was not increased in comparison to the hours of practice learning in the master's programme, the students felt equipped to competently perform social work with families facing multiple challenges. The results showed that:

- the students who chose this type of practice learning had an opportunity for the first time to apply social work concepts in practice completely independently and without the presence of a field mentor (although they

---

5   The three focus groups were conducted with students after the first year of the project. One of the aims was to explore their views on the experience of practice learning within the project.

did, of course, have a faculty mentor to help them apply these concepts in practice);

- by testing the concepts independently in practice, the students overcame the common fear of working with families and gained experience in competently conducting conversations with a family;
- the students applied all of the basic concepts of social work with a family as well as applying additional knowledge in practice, thus coming to the important realisation that theory is actually useful in practice and provides reliable support for social work with families;
- during the year-long independent work with a family, the students, with intensive support from their faculty mentors, learned how to apply knowledge in practice and how to face concrete challenges in working with a family, as well as acquiring a vocabulary to help them verbalise their work processes (Kodele & Mešl, 2015).

The above findings encouraged us to look more closely at what had happened during the practice learning that resulted in the students' experiences being so different from those in regular practice situations.

We want to emphasise that success in practice learning depends on several factors. Two research questions were posed:

1. How did students experience practice learning in small mentoring groups that focused on the reflexive use of knowledge?
2. What did the process of learning based on the reflexive use of knowledge contribute to?

Method

Population and Sampling

The population consisted of students enrolled in the master's programme Social Work with the Family in the 2014/2015, 2015/2016 and 2016/2017 academic years, and in the programme Social Work[6] (modules Psychosocial Support and Help and Social Work in Education) in the 2017/2018 and 2018/2019 academic years who had chosen to complete their practice in the manner developed in the project Helping Families in the Community. We used a non-random, convenience sample: we analysed the material from the mentoring groups that was available to us. Thus,

---

6   Due to a redesigned study programme, since the 2017/2018 academic year the study programme Social Work with a Family has only been run as part-time study every second year. The master's programme Social Work was redesigned into several modules. Within the framework of the module Psychosocial Support and Help, we are developing content relating to that of the programme Social Work with the Family.

the sample consisted of four mentoring groups (one group in each of the above academic years except 2017/2018), involving a total of 19 students (17 women and 2 men). All of the students had previously earned a bachelor's degree in social work.

Data Collection

We kept minutes of each mentoring group meeting in order to summarise the work process during the meeting. The minutes were taken by one student and were emailed to all of the other members of the mentoring group after the meeting. The minutes included each member's reflection on the meeting (how they experienced the meetings, what they learned for themselves and for their collaboration with families, what they missed). The students' reflections were free; students were not trained in advance how to formulate them. For the purposes of the present article, we analysed student meeting reflections from the four different mentoring groups for which the most materials were available: from the 2014/2015, 2015/2016, 2016/2017 and 2018/2019 academic years. The analysis included a total of 41 mentoring meeting minutes with 147 student reflections. The students who collaborated with the families were informed that all of the collected material could be used for research purposes and they gave their written consent.

Method of Analysis

The data obtained were analysed according to the classical method of qualitative analysis (Creswell, 2007) using the qualitative analysis programme MAXQDA. The analysis was conducted by two researchers who were also leaders of a mentoring group. Content analysis was conducted (Vaismoradi et al., 2013) using three steps involved in analytical procedures:

1.   *Categorisation of the text into thematic codes.*

The aim of the first step was to define codes based on our research questions and a predefined categorisation. Based on similarities and predefined criteria, we classified groups of concepts and themes into specific categories. This helped us to understand, simplify and reduce the complexity of the records in terms of our research objectives, and to assign specific parts of the texts to the appropriate codes. The coding process facilitated the analysis, naming, categorisation and structuring of the text. In order to do this, we first had to enter the reflections into the MAXQDA programme and then read all of the text considering the previously defined research questions. Three sets of topics were defined: group, method of participation in the group and learning process. These were further divided into subcategories and codes.

2.   *Overall representation of the different codes in the text.*
      This step provided us with a basic overview of important themes dis-
      cussed by the students in their reflections. The codes were assigned based
      on the frequency of mention of the themes throughout the text and on
      the number of meeting minutes in which a particular code occurs.

3.   *Substantive analysis of the coded text.*
      Substantive text analysis represents a synthesis of all of the steps of the
      analytical procedures mentioned above. In this step, the content of the
      text is analysed based on the categorisation described above.

Results

As mentioned above, in our qualitative analysis of students' reflections
on the meetings, we identified three main categories that emerged as the most
important factors in the success of practice learning: the group, the method
of participation in the group and the learning process. Below, we define these
categories using different codes, followed by a content analysis.

Group

Table 1

Group

CODING SYSTEM	NO. OF CODES	NO. OF MEETING MINUTES (n = 41)
SAFE SPACE FOR COLLABORATION/WORK	31	21
WELLBEING IN THE GROUP	28	16
SUPPORT IN CONDUCTING PRACTICE/FOR WORK	23	15
IMPORTANT AND USEFUL MEETINGS	19	14
TIME FOR WORK	17	10
LOOKING FORWARD TO FUTURE MEETINGS	14	10
ENCOURAGEMENT FOR WORK	12	11
ACCEPTANCE OF COMPLIMENTS AND REFLECTIONS FROM OTHER GROUP MEMBERS	12	10
SATISFACTION	12	8
SATISFACTION WITH PAST COLLABORATION, CELEBRATION OF ACHIEVEMENTS	8	4
SATISFACTION WITH THE GROUP AND THE MENTOR	7	4
ENTHUSIASM ABOUT OTHER MEMBERS' WORK	11	9
EMPOWERMENT OF GROUP MEMBERS, BETTER EQUIPPED FOR WORK	11	9
WORK IN A SMALL GROUP	10	6
CARE FOR OTHER GROUP MEMBERS	7	6
NEED FOR REGULAR MENTORING MEETINGS	7	5
PROGRESS IN THE GROUP'S WORK	6	5
GROUP CONNECTEDNESS	5	5

The analysis of the results shows that most of the students perceived the mentoring group as *a safe space for collaboration and work*. They understood a safe space for collaboration and work as a space where they could voice their opinions and questions, as well as dilemmas that arose during collaboration with families, without feeling fear or shame.

Feeling safe within the group allowed members to feel *comfortable and relaxed at meetings* and contributed to positive group dynamics among members. The students described the meetings as *important and useful*, primarily because they received *support in carrying out their collaboration with the family*.

I had a very challenging meeting during practice that I didn't handle well, so I needed a lot of support. (1.R2.S3)[7]

The students liked the fact that they could take *time for work* during the meetings, i.e., each member was able to report in detail about his or her collaboration with a family, and also that the leaders of the meetings adjusted the time for group work to the needs of the individual group member. They had ample time to work during the meetings, which was clearly facilitated by the fact that the work was organised in *a small group* (maximum six students), which some students described as an important factor in the success of the practice learning.

The students were generally *satisfied with the meetings* and frequently described their satisfaction with various superlatives (e.g., great, cool, I really enjoyed it, I'm really satisfied to be part of such a group). They frequently related their satisfaction to how satisfied they were with their previous collaboration in the group, with the group as such, and with the mentor's work. The satisfaction with the meetings was associated with the fact that the students *looked forward to future meetings*. When the students reported working with families, they often expressed *enthusiasm* about how other group members had overcome the challenges of working with families. The students who reported working with families *acknowledged the compliments and reflections on their collaboration* that they had received from other group members during meetings. In this way, they received either *validation* for their good work or *encouragement* for their continued collaboration with families.

The students were also satisfied with the implementation of the meetings because the meetings helped them to *feel more empowered and better equipped to work with a family*. They also learned *how to take care of each other in the group*.

---

7   Student reflections were coded so that we first noted the year of mentoring group introduction (1 for first year; 2 for second year, etc.), then added the serial number of the record (Record 1 - R1) and the serial number of the student (Student 1 - S1).

I'm glad that B. had the opportunity to analyse her work with the new family because this family needed help in several areas and B. had a difficult task. Since she has just started working with this family, I think it's necessary for us to give her more support. (2.R14.S7)

From one meeting to another, the students recognised the need for *regular meetings*, recognised *progress in the group's work*, and felt *more connected to group members*.

Method of collaboration in the group

Table 2
Method of collaboration in the group

CODING SYSTEM	NO. OF CODES	NO. OF MEETING MINUTES (n = 41)
CONCRETE SUPPORT FOR COLLABORATION/WAY OF ACTION	19	14
COLLABORATIVE SEARCHING FOR SOLUTIONS	11	9
MUTUAL HELP	10	9
CONVERSATION ABOUT PROBLEMS	8	7
WORK ON PERSONAL THEMES	7	5
ESTABLISHMENT OF A WORK RELATIONSHIP	1	1
REVIEW EFFICACY OF JOINTLY FORMULATED SOLUTIONS AT THE MEETING	1	1
FLEXIBLE SCHEDULING OF MEETINGS	1	1

The students cited receiving *concrete support for their actions and/or collaboration with family* as the main factor in their satisfaction with the method of working at meetings.

Today's meeting was enormously helpful for me. Through all the support and suggestions (the most useful one was that I should only consider what is happening in the current meeting, what is happening today, at this moment, here, what is current) I got new momentum and went to my meeting with the family full of curiosity. (4.R9.S18)

They liked the *collaborative search for solutions* to the challenges they had encountered while working with families, as well as the *mutual help* among group members.

As a space where students have *the opportunity to talk about the problems they face when working with families*, the meetings were also considered a source of satisfaction with the working method. As a 'source of satisfaction with the method of work at the meetings', some students also indicated that the

meetings allowed them *to work on personal themes* (they received support in solving their personal themes, which were often seen as obstacles when working with families).

> The previous meeting was 'food for thought', even after the meeting – especially regarding the strong emotions we develop in our work with users. I'm personally very touched by the situation of the family. I'm grateful I can share this at meetings. (2.R7.S11)

Regarding the group collaboration method, some students pointed out certain other aspects, such as the importance of group collaboration in the form of *a co-creative working relationship*, *the constant review of the effectiveness of the jointly developed solutions at the meetings* and *the flexibility in scheduling the meetings*.

Learning Process

Table 3
The learning process

CODING SYSTEM	NO. OF CODES	NO. OF MEETING MINUTES (n = 41)
LEARNING FROM SHARING EXPERIENCES	43	29
NEW KNOWLEDGE, WORK GUIDELINES	25	15
NEW (DIFFERENT) VIEW OF THE SITUATION	24	17
EXPERT GROWTH	16	15
INSIGHT INTO OTHER WORK PROCESSES	16	12
VALUABLE LEARNING SITUATION	15	13
PERSONAL GROWTH	8	8
OPENING UP OF WORKING TOPICS	5	3
BEGINNERS ANXIETY	5	3

Analysis of the results showed that the students learned the most during the meetings by *sharing their experiences working with families.*

> When we share experiences and different views, I build up a wealth of knowledge and get the feeling that I'm not alone in this, and that important people are there for me to count on when I find myself in a dilemma or a difficult situation related to social work with a family. (4.R6.S19)

A conversation about the process of working with families in the group provided students with *new knowledge about how to proceed and/or guidelines for further work with the family* and often provided *a different (new) perspective on the experience of working together.*

When the students shared their story of working with a family with others in the group and gained *insight into the processes of other members' work with families*, it was *a valuable learning situation for all group members*.

I gained many useful insights. I liked it when the leader pointed out the use of the word 'sincere', because it was only during the mentoring meeting that I could imagine how this word would sound. (2.R3.S10)

The mentor meetings also provided opportunities for students to *develop professionally and personally*.

All this information, members' ways of thinking and ideas for possible solutions give me strength in learning for professional work and for life. I receive constant confirmations that I've chosen the right practice. (4.R7.S20)

At the meetings, the students identified *work topics* that would be useful when working with families. The meetings were particularly valuable to them at the beginning of their work with families because *the students were often anxious because they did not know how to make initial contact with the family*. The support of the faculty mentor was particularly valuable to them in these cases.

Discussion

The world is changing rapidly; social problems are constantly being redefined and have become fluid entities (Chow et al., 2011). Consequently, social work education cannot prepare social work students in detail for work in practice. The findings presented in the present article indicate that the reflexive approach used in small mentoring groups helped students to integrate theoretical knowledge and practice as future social workers. Faculty mentors encouraged students to consistently reflect on and apply various theoretical knowledge about working with families facing multiple challenges. By helping each other, working together to find solutions to problems, and sharing experiences from their work with families, group members were able to reflect on their own actions in practice. It is reflection on their own actions that enables the creation of new knowledge and new meanings (Schön, 1991). In this way, students gained important new knowledge for their work with families.

However, a reflexive approach as such does not guarantee that students will be effectively supported in their practical work. Other factors also contribute. Analysis of the results indicated that if we want 'reflexive dialogue' to be effective in the group, a culture of collaboration must first permeate the group to allow and encourage participation by each group member in a way that makes them feel safe. In addition, students who reported working with families viewed comments from other group members as important support that strengthened

their resources. They also found it valuable to hear reflections on their work with families from the perspective of other group members. Similarly, Toseland and Rivas (2014) include among the fundamental values of group social work participation and positive relationships between group members, collaboration and mutual responsibility for decisions, the importance of individual initiative in the group and free participation, and a high degree of individualisation within the group. Among the fundamental factors that influence the success or effectiveness of practice training, Bogo (2015) cited a positive learning environment, along with cooperative and supportive mentor-student relationships and the importance of reflexive dialogue.

It was possible to realise the above values and factors in the mentoring groups, in part because of the group size (six students maximum), which enabled students to take time to resolve dilemmas and questions about the challenges they encountered in their practice. Faculty mentors had support (both time and financial support for regular meetings every two weeks) that enabled them to effectively support students in their practice work. However, such support cannot be taken for granted. In our case, the support ceased at the end of the project, after which we depended on volunteerism and the willingness of faculty staff to continue to provide support to students. A 2014 Council on Social Work Education report on practice education notes that, in order to support students' practice, it is first necessary to provide them with sufficient time and financial support. Accordingly, students receive ongoing support in the form of guidance, timely support and monitoring of the progress of their work (Council on Social Work Education CSWE, 2015). This was also found to be important in our research.

An important finding of the present research is that the ongoing and concrete support provided by the mentoring group to students engaged in practice enabled them to cope with the sense of uncertainty that is common in collaborative processes (Čačinovič Vogrinčič & Mešl, 2019; Kodele & Mešl, 2016). In a co-creative working relationship, there are usually no ready-made answers to solutions, and the role of social workers is often to transform despair into hope, which requires them to insist on IWPH. However, to insist on a co-creative working relationship, students needed support to either justify their insistence or to receive reassurance that they were doing well, when changes were small and slow. This is supported by the findings of many authors (Kourgiantakis et al., 2018; Maidment, 2000; Saltzburg et al., 2010;) that mentors can provide students with the support they need in social work practice by guiding their thinking, discussing with them their interactions with families and family members, and providing ongoing positive and constructive feedback to facilitate self-reflection on their own behaviour. The feedback was given

to the students at each meeting, and it certainly impacted the development of the students' social work skills (better understanding of the complexity of family lifeworld, the theory used, etc.). The feedback students receive from their mentors helps them reflect on their practice, connect theory to practice and build their confidence (Bogo, 2015). Thus, if learning in a mentoring group is to contribute to successful learning in practice, it must be framed as a reflexive dialogue between mentor and student. Such dialogue is possible in a small group with a maximum of six students. Ongoing and concrete support for social work practice and professional development is needed and must be underpinned by joint exploration of possibilities for action in specific situations that arise when working with families. In another context, this type of support for students in their practice learning may seem self-evident, but it is not (yet) common in the Slovenian education system. This system is based on triangulation of resources (student, faculty mentor, field mentor), which is good and important. The problem is that field mentors often do not support students in the reflexive use of knowledge. A future challenge for the faculty is to encourage field mentors to provide students with ongoing reflection on theoretical knowledge in practice. One way to address this challenge is to provide mentors the experience of reflexive dialogue and lead mentoring groups together: both the faculty mentor and the field mentor. Field mentors can spread their new experience and knowledge further with their colleagues, etc. The integration of theory and practice is still a blind spot in our practice learning, which focuses more on representing how social work is done in practice, unfortunately still all too often with the message that theory and practice are two different things. We see the student support for the practice learning that we have developed as part of this project as a good starting point for students who have experienced such support to put it into practice when they become field mentors.

Research limitations

The circumstances of the data collection and analysis of the material that might have affected the final results are as follows:

- At the start of our collaboration with the students, we did not specifically define the scope of what should be included in the reflections at a meeting. On the one hand, the students had more freedom in expressing their views, as they were able to write what they had truly grasped from the meeting. On the other hand, the records of some of the students were quite modest or tautological (e.g., Everything was O.K., Super, etc.). In the future, it would therefore be reasonable to consider how to present information to students about the intended scope of reflections

on a meeting in a manner that still allows freedom of personal expression. It would also make sense to think about how to support students to reflect on how their personal themes (e.g., gender, family of origin, cultural background, socioeconomic status, religious and other beliefs, etc.) influence their epistemological assumptions that affect how they perceive, feel, evaluate and act when interacting with families facing multiple challenges (see also Fook and Gardner).

- The students' reflections were also related to the amount of time elapsed before writing the reflection: if a lot of time had passed since the meeting, students found it more difficult to formulate their experience.

- The students' reflections were analysed by two researchers who had also participated in leading the mentoring meetings. This might be an advantage in the sense of knowing the context and understanding the work processes, but it could also represent a research limitation. Despite our systematic analysis with predefined steps aimed at ensuring a rigorous analysis and relevant results, the fact that the analysis was conducted by two researchers with experience in leading mentoring groups could have influenced the results.

Conclusion

The purpose of our research was to identify key factors that influence the quality of practical education for students working with families facing multiple challenges. The outlined results show that the presented method of support, as developed in the project, enables students to work competently in practice. We need to be clear that a degree does not necessarily mean full competence to work in practice. Supporting reflexive dialogue about practice experiences and the application of acquired knowledge is also what social workers who are already in the profession need.

It is quite common for social workers to quickly lose or forget what they learned in their studies as soon as they enter the work environment. This is because the institutional context largely determines their actions (Clapton et al., 2006; Mešl, 2008) and their knowledge of social work takes a back seat. Moreover, social work is a profession and science in which it cannot be said that the development is complete, that we have arrived at definitive theories and methods, or that we have created a body of knowledge with which to work henceforth. What is true of social work knowledge today may change tomorrow, as may the society in which we live and the needs of the people with whom we work (Jivanjee et al., 2015; Kodele & Mešl, 2015; Lam et al., 2006; Marquez, 2016). Indeed, social work

operates in the field of people with complex psychosocial problems, so knowledge should be constantly evolving and new responses to people's real everyday challenges should be developed together. For this reason, social workers need to constantly reflect on their own practice and develop new knowledge. This can be a good starting point for social workers as field mentors to be able to provide students experience of practice learning based on reflexive dialogue.

References

Argyris, C., & Schön, D. (1974). *Theory in practice: Increasing professional effectiveness*. Jossey-Bass.

Asakura, K., Bogo, M., Good, B., & Power, R. (2018). Teaching note – social work serial: Using video recorded simulated client sessions to teach social work practice. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *54*(2), 397–404. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2017.1404525.

Bates, A., Bates, M, & Bates, L. (2007). Preparing students for the professional workplace: Who has responsibility for what. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, 8*(2), 121–129.

Birkenmaier, J., & Berg-Weger, M. (2007). *Practicum companion for social work. Integrating class and field work*(2nd ed.). Saint Louis University: Pearson.

 Bogo, M. (2010). *Achieving competence in social work through field education*. University of Toronto Press.

Bogo, M. (2015). Field education for clinical social work practice: Best practices and contemporary challenges. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, *43*(3), 317–324. http://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-015-0526-5.

Burton, J. (2015). *Practice learning in social work*. Palgrave.

Chow, A., Lam, D., Leung, G. M., Wong, D., & Chan, B. (2011). Promoting reflexivity among social work students: The development and evaluation of a programme. *Social Work Education*, *30*(2), 141–156. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2011.540377.

Clapton, G., Cree, V. E., Allan, M., Edwards, R., Forbes, R., Irwin, M., Paterson, W., & Perry, R. (2006). Grasping the nettle: Integrating learning and practice revisited and re-imagined. *Social Work Education, 25*(6), 645–656. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615470600833634.

Council on Social Work Education. (2015). *Report of the CSWE Summit on Field Education 2014*. CSWE. https://www.cswe.org/Centers-Initiatives/Initiatives/Summit-on-Field-Education2014.

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches.* Sage.

Čačinovič Vogrinčič, G., & Šugman Bohinc, L. (2000). Učinkovitost (uspešnost) razgovora v socialnem delu z družino [The effectiveness (efficiency) of the conversation in social work with a family]. *Socialno delo, 39*(3), 175–189.

Čačinovič Vogrinčič, G., & Mešl, N. (2019). *Socialno delo z družino. Soustvarjanje želenih izidov in družinske razvidnosti* [Social work with families. Co-creation of desired outcomes and family transparency]. Fakulteta za socialno delo.

D'Cruz, H., Gillingham, P., & Melendez, S. (2007). Reflexivity, its meanings and relevance for social work: A critical review of the literature. *British Journal of Social Work, 37*, 73–90. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bc1001

Engelbertink, M. M. J., Kelders, S. M., Woudt-Mittendorf, K. M., & Westerhof, G. J. (2022). The added value of autobiographical reflexivity with persuasive technology for professional identities of social work students: A randomized controlled trial. *Social Work Education, 41*(5), 767–786. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2021.1889810

Fook, J., & Gardner, F. (2007). *Practising critical reflection: A resource handbook*. Open University Press.

Fortune, A. E., Rogers, C. A., & Williamson, E. (2018). Effects of an integrative field seminar for MSW students. *Journal of Social Work Education, 54*(1), 94–109. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797/.2017.1307149

Garcia-Aracil, A., Monteiro, S., & Almeida, L. (2021). Students' perceptions of their preparedness for transition to work after graduation. *Active Learning in Higher Education, 22*(1), 49–62. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1469787418791026

Healy, K. (2005). *Social work theories in context: Creating frameworks for practice*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Hernandez-March, J., Martin del Peso, M., & Leguey, S. (2009). Graduates' skills and higher education: The employers' perspective. *Tertiary Education and Management, 15*(1), 1–16. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13583880802699978

Jivanjee, P., Pendell, K., Nissen, L., & Goodluck, C. (2015). Lifelong learning in social work: A qualitative exploration with social work practitioners, students, and field instructors. *Advances in Social Work, 16*(2), 260–275. https://doi.org/10.18060/18407

Kodele, T., & Mešl, N. (2015). Refleksivna uporaba znanja v kontekstu praktičnega učenja [The reflective application of knowledge in the context of practical learning]. *Socialno delo, 54*(3/4), 189–203.

Kodele, T., & Mešl, N. (Eds.). (2016). *Družine s številnimi izzivi: Soustvarjanje pomoči v skupnosti* [Families with multiple challenges: Co-creating help in the community]. Ljubljana: Fakulteta za socialno delo.

Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experiential learning*. Prentice Hall.

Kourgiantakis, T., Sewell, M. K., & Bogo, M. (2018). The importance of feedback in preparing social work students for field education. *Clinical Social Work Journal, 47*, 124–133. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-018-0671-8

Lam, O. B., Wong, D. K. P., Hui, S. K., Lee, F. W. L., & Chan, E. K. L. (2006). Preparing social workers to be lifelong learners: Use of problem-based learning as a training component in the social work curriculum. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 26*(3–4), 103–119. https://doi.org/10.1300/J067v26n03_07

Mackay, R., & Millar, J. (2012). Involving service users in the classroom with social work students. *Nurse Education Today, 32*, 167–172. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2011.10.004

Madsen, W. C. (2007). *Collaborative therapy with multi-stressed families* (2nd ed.). The Guilford 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. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615470050003520

Marquez, M. R. (2016). Continuing professional education and competency: Implications for social work practice. *International Journal for Innovation Education and Research, 4*(6), 156–165. https://doi.org/10.31686/ijier.vol4.iss7.570

Mešl, N. (2008). *Razvijanje in uporaba znanja v socialnem delu z družino: procesi soustvarjanja teoretskega znanja v praksi* [The development and application of knowledge in social work with the family: The processes of co-creation of theoretical knowledge in practice]. Ljubljana: Fakulteta za socialno delo.

Noble, C. (2001). Researching field practice in social work education. Integrating of theory and practice through the use of narratives. *Journal of Social Work*, *1*(3), 347–360. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F146801730100100307

Papouli, E. (2014). Field learning in social work education: Implications for educators and instructions. *Field Scholar,* 4.2. htttps://www. fieldeducator.simmons.edu

Parker, J. (2007). Developing effective practice learning for tomorrow's social workers. *Social Work Education, 26*(8), 763–779.

Parton, N., & O'Byrne, P. (2000). *Constructive social work: Towards a new practice*. Palgrave McMillan.

Rai, G.S. (2004). International fieldwork experience: A survey of US schools. *International Social Work, 47*(2), 213–226. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872804034138

Saltzburg, S., Greene, G. J., & Drew, H. (2010). Using live supervision in field   education: Preparing social work students for clinical practice. *Families in Society, 91*(3), 293–299. https://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.4008

Schön, D. (1991). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action.* Ashgate-Arena.

Shulman, L. S. (1998). Theory, practice, and the education of professionals. *The Elementary School Journal*, *98*(5), 511–526.

Sicora, A. (2019). Reflective practice and learning from mistakes in social work student placement. *Social Work Education, 38*(1), 63–74. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2018.1508567

Taylor, C., & White, S. (2000). *Practising reflexivity in health and welfare: Making knowledge*. Open University Press.

Thompson, N. (2000). *Theory and practice in human services*. Open University Press.

Toseland, R. W., & Rivas, R. F. (2014). *An introduction to group work practice* (7th ed). Pearson.

Trede, F., Macklin, R., & Bridges, D. (2012). Professional identity development: A review of the higher education literature. *Studies in Higher Education*, *37*(3), 365–384. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2010.521237

Vaismoradi, M., Turunen, H., & Bondas, T. (2013). Content analysis and thematic analysis; implications for conducting a qualitative descriptive study. *Nursing and Health Sciences*, *15*(3), 398–405. https://doi.org/10.1111/nhs.12048

Videmšek, P. (2021). *Supervizija v socialnem delu: učenje na podlagi dobrih izkušenj* [Supervision in social work: Teaching from good experiences]. Fakulteta za socialno delo.

Wayne, J., Bogo, M., & Raskin, M. (2010). Field education as the signature pedagogy of social work education. *Journal of Social Work Education, 46*(3), 327–229. https://doi.org/10.5175/JSWE.2010.200900043

Biographical note

Tadeja Kodele, PhD, is an assistant lecturer at the Faculty of Social Work, University of Ljubljana. She is a qualified social worker. Her research interests mainly cover social work with families, children participation and practice teaching in social work.

Nina Mešl, PhD, assistant professor in the field of social work at the Faculty of Social Work, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. Her main research areas are: uses of theory in practice, and approaches to the development and use of knowledge, social work with families, with a special focus on families facing multiple challenges, and trauma-informed social work.