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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

FROM CLASSROOM TO WORKPLACE:  
BECOMING A SOCIAL WORKER

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN SOCIAL WORK

BY

SARAH HESSENAUER

CHICAGO, IL

DECEMBER 2011

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For my daughter, Hannah.  
May you never forget your dreams or how high you can fly.

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## ABSTRACT

This exploratory qualitative study examines the key educational experiences that graduated bachelor level social workers identified as being most helpful to them in their current social work careers. Twenty traditional aged social workers who graduated from CSWE accredited, bachelor level, social work programs in the last 4 to 24 months and who had been working in a social work agency for a minimum of three months were asked to voluntarily participate in the study. The social workers participated in one-on-one interviews in which they were asked to describe their educational experiences and their beliefs about how those experiences supported them in their careers in social work. The data from these interviews were coded to identify themes. These themes will assist social work educators in examining variables or factors that current social workers identify as being significant in the education of future social workers.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Social work educators rely on a variety of sources to guide them in learning what to teach bachelor level social work students in order to attempt to aid their students in becoming competent social workers. These sources include but are not limited to: prior educational / work experiences, their peers, journals, books and recommendations from regulatory bodies. One source that is not examined comprehensively, however, is feedback from social work students who have graduated and are working in the social work field having utilized their education or lack of it in their interactions with clients.

The Council of Social Education is one of the regulatory bodies that social work educators refer to in order to guide them in educating students. “The Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) issued the first set of accreditation guidelines in 1952” (Pardeck, 2005, p.113). Such accreditation guidelines are set forth and regularly revised to guide educators in developing and implementing social work education programs that will best prepare students to be competent social workers. The Council of Social Work Education (2008) states, “Social work education – at the baccalaureate, master’s, and doctoral levels-shapes the profession’s future through the education of competent professionals, the generation of knowledge, and the exercise of leadership within the professional community” (p.1). To ensure successful outcomes in their programs, social work schools follow the guidelines as identified by the CSWE. These schools develop

outcome measures that, if met, they believe, will demonstrate that their students will become competent social workers. However, in this process, feedback from students is often a variable that is missed or not included.

Universities may employ classroom evaluations, in which students are asked to give feedback regarding their learning experience in a specific class, and alumni surveys, which explore if students have passed licensing exams or if they have found employment. It is assumed by some educators that following the accreditation standards, meeting outcome measures, and having successful class evaluations will ensure competent social workers once these students enter the field. However, Riebschleger and Grettenberger (2006) stated that “within the social work literature, there appear to be few instruments for assessing student learning” (p. 186). They further discuss the need to develop tools that will “reflect actual student performance” (p.188). Social workers must be committed to constructing assessment tools and conducting research that will allow students to demonstrate learning of critical values, knowledge, and skills required for the field of social work (Crisp & Lister, 2002).

CSWE states, “Competency-based education is an outcome performance approach to curriculum design” (p.1). CSWE, in their most recent educational policy statement, identifies ten core competencies for students to achieve:

- 2.1.1) Identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly
- 2.1.2) apply social work ethical principles to guide professional practice
- 2.1.3) apply critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgments
- 2.1.4) engage diversity and difference in practice
- 2.1.5) advance human rights and social and economic justice
- 2.1.6) engage in research-informed practice and practice-informed research
- 2.1.7) apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment
- 2.1.8) engage in policy practice to advance social and economic well-being and to deliver effective social work services
- 2.1.9) respond to contexts

that shape practice and 2.1.10) engage, assess, intervene, and evaluate with individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities (Education Policy, 2008)

Although CSWE provides direction on what topics to cover, it does not specifically state how educators should ensure that they are meeting these competencies. It would be beneficial to identify what students find the most valuable in their learning in regards to these areas once they enter the workforce so that educators can continue to build on those areas.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research is to provide an in-depth qualitative case study of what specific knowledge / concepts, values and skills students learned in their educational programs that the students believe they are building on once they enter the work force. The purpose of this study is to examine what knowledge students gained from their education that they find the most beneficial in their current roles as social workers. This information will help guide social work educators in examining the material they are presenting in their coursework in order to aid students in the successful transition from the classroom to the workplace.

### **Research Question**

The overarching question in this study is: what knowledge, values and skills do graduates of bachelor level social work programs identify learning in their undergraduate education that they apply in their jobs as professional social workers. By examining this issue, we can examine specifically what content is recalled and utilized by students after graduation.

### **Importance of the Study**

Educators understand that each student has different learning styles and that we must focus on more than one way of teaching in order to meet an individual student's needs. It should be the goal of educators to ensure students are gaining the knowledge and capacity for thought that they need in order to assimilate this knowledge in the workplace. By gathering detailed feedback from a wide range of students, we can derive themes about what students consider the most helpful to them and how they apply the knowledge in the details of their work.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been numerous studies on social work students; however, there appears to be a gap in the literature in regards to what students identify is important to them or their learning in their social work education and their future employment. With field education being identified as a signature pedagogy by CSWE (Education Policy, 2008), research examining the role of field work in social work education is a major theme in current literature. Such articles include assessing graduating BSW field students preparation for generalist practice (Riebschleger, 2006), teaching social work students practice skills by field instructors (Mumm, 2006), the process of field instruction (Knight, 2001), measuring BSW student learning in field instruction (Cavazos, Alonzo, 2006) and ranking desirable field instructor characteristics (Barretti, 2009).

Another common theme due to the increase in the older adult population is research related to teaching content related to aging; for example, infusing aging content across the curriculum (Lee & Waites, 2006, Singleton, 2006), geriatric enrichment in social work education (Sanders, Dorfman & Ingram, 2009) and research, macro practice and aging in the social work education curriculum (Appleby & Botsford, 2006).

In 2001, Tungate, Lazzari and Buchan stated there was a gap in the literature with regards to “how BSW students themselves assess the overall value and relevance of their educational experience” and “an assessment of their social work educational experiences”

(p. 98). They conducted a qualitative study in which they focused on social work department strengths and weaknesses and student experiences in field placement. The researchers analyzed 363 open-ended questionnaires. Tungate, Lazzari and Buchan (2001) identified two major themes: “the significance of relationships between department and field faculty and staff and students” (p. 109) and an “overwhelmingly positive evaluation of field experience” (p.107). They go on to state that “students, perhaps because of their fresh perspectives on social issues and problems faced by client systems with whom they interact in practice settings, provide a valuable and necessary voice in the assessment and further development of social work education” (Tungate, Lazzari, & Buchan, 2001, p. 111).

In 2000, Michael Reisch and Lily Jarman-Rohde stated educators need to reassess the profession of social work which they state “requires a reconceptualization of social work practice and, especially, social work education in a rapidly changing society” (p. 210). They further go on to identify issues that stand in the way of this reassessment including: how to expand a curriculum “that is already overcrowded and watered down” ... “requires faculty to engage in dialogue about what students need to know before they enter schools of social work”, and fiscal restraints leading to more time on grant development and less time for direct classroom work ( Reisch & Jarman-Rohde, 211). Reisch and Jarman-Rohde (2000) argue that social worker educators need to take risks in identifying new ways to present social work education.

It may be this fear about change and the work that may be involved in this process that prevents social work educators from researching the impact of their teaching on their

students. In a world where social work educators are already feeling overwhelmed and hard-pressed to cover a broad range of social work issues, results of examining the impact of education on social workers may lead to educators being fearful about the outcomes and the possible energy and resources it would take to address these outcomes. However, without this ongoing evaluation social work education will not be able to adapt to the necessary changes needed in the curriculum. It may be safer and less time consuming for educators to continue their current models of education within the standards / content provided and not be forced to create or to follow new models.

There has been limited research in the effectiveness of social work curriculum in the preparation of students for social work practice (Pardeck, 2005). Although CSWE has standards for educators to follow, social work educators, in accordance with academic freedom, teach material that they believe will be the most useful to the students. Educators are given an idea of what needs to be addressed in their course content from CSWE; however, it is up to each educator to determine how to meet the goals of their courses and to ensure student learning occurs. Pardeck (2004) reported that according to Reisch and Gambrill (1997), “social work faculty often use their authority to claim what is important in terms of the educational process” (p. 37). In addition, he states concern over the number of faculty who do not have doctoral degrees, especially at the graduate level. Pardeck (2004) reports that “many of these faculty do not know how to conduct research and have an anti-science worldview” (p.38). Due to this, he believes that educators are not teaching social work material that is proven by research and states these



educators “have a tendency to be anti-scientific and lack appreciation for scholarship” (Pardeck, 2004, p. 36).

In addition, in his overall analysis of social work education in the United States, Pardeck (2005) stated that “social work education, from baccalaureate to doctoral levels, employs educational, practice, scholarly, interprofessional and service delivery models to orient and shape the profession’s future in the context of expanding knowledge, changing technologies and complex social concerns”(p.114). He reports, “CSWE curriculum standards are simply vague and grounded in ideology” (Pardeck, 2005, p.117). Lastly, Pardeck (2005) found that “since the 1980’s, a limited number of outcome studies have been conducted measuring the effectiveness of the social work curriculum in preparing students for practice” (p.123). Based on his research, he recommends that CSWE more “clearly define what social work programs should offer in the professional curriculum” and to ensure that educators base their teaching interventions on evidence based practice (Pardeck, 2005, p. 128). It is the definition of terms and concepts that social work educators struggle with in ensuring they are meeting the expectations of CSWE.

The process is further complicated by the fact that social work professionals have difficulty identifying what specific skills, values or knowledge makes a social worker a professional or even competent in the field of social work. Along with this, social work programs / courses teach concepts that are difficult to conceptualize and to measure. Some of these concepts include: empathy, relationship building, boundaries, ethics, values, justice, reading non-verbal language, development of interpersonal skills, etc..., Pamela Trevithick (2000) states:

the complex nature of social work is due, in part, to the fact that it involves working across differences of class, race, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, religion, culture, health, geography, expectations and outlook on life. Differences can be seen in different ways that problems are presented, communicated and perceived by individuals in terms of the solutions sought (Trevithick, p.2).

Social work students, each with their own learning styles, need a wide range of knowledge, skills and ability to adapt their skills to different situation and cultures. “Providing competent social work interventions involves blending interpersonal skills, cultural competence and technical knowledge” (Megivern, et al, 2007, p. 118). A difficulty is measuring if students are utilizing the skills they learn in the classroom due to the difficulty in defining and operationalizing concepts they are learning about. As stated by Emilia Martine-Brawley (1999), “servicing is always individualized and applicable to single events and can seldom be totally efficient. Each serving encounter is a new occurrence and, while the social worker’s schemata may have been enriched or changed by other encounters, each new interaction with the client or a community requires new artistry, appropriately fitting the situation”(p. 339). Educators must grapple with identifying which specific “servicing” skills are most significant and how to teach these specific skills in the classroom so that they apply to a wide range of social work situations.

Marietta Barretti (2004) stated that developing professional social workers should be a goal of education but reports that “professional socialization in social work education is an area of investigation and study that has not captured the interest of most social work educators and practitioners” (p. 255). Barretti (2004) compared the professional socialization of social work students to medical and nursing students and

found that that “the existing empirical literature concerning how social work students become professionals reveals broad disparities in breadth and depth compared to other professionals” ( p. 276). The social work profession must be willing to commit to learning more about social work students, which must include listening to and learning from them. This will allow educators to learn valuable information about what knowledge, skills, and values students are learning that the students identify as important, especially post-graduation.

It is also important to note that not all of the knowledge student’s gain in social work programs comes directly from the classroom material being presented. Barretti (2004) reports that in her review of social work research, “many of the findings inadvertently suggest that what social work students learn in their programs is not necessarily what is intentionally taught but what faculty and field instructors model” (p.277). One cannot underestimate the relationship the students have with their educators, their field instructor, their advisors or their peers.

Social workers should be concerned over the transmittal of social work education and concepts from the classroom to the work place. “A straightforward connection seldom exists between knowledge acquired through college education and the handling of practical tasks in the work field” (Heggen, 2008, p. 218). Michael Eraut (2004) explored the transfer of education to the workplace setting. He identified different types of knowledge gained in education programs. He identifies them as theoretical knowledge, methodological knowledge, practice skills and techniques, generic skills and general knowledge about the occupation (Eraut, 2004). He states that “transferring a particular

concept or idea from an education setting to a workplace setting is particularly difficult, because of the considerable differences in context, culture and modes of learning” (Eraut, 2004, p.212). He goes on to state that the transfer of a concept or idea requires:

The extraction of potentially relevant knowledge from the context (s) of its acquisition and prior use, understanding the new situation-a process that often depends on informal social learning, recognizing what knowledge and skills are relevant, transforming them to fit the new situation and finally integrating them with other knowledge and skills in order to think/act/communicate in the new situation (p. 212).

The goal of the social work educator is to prepare the student for this transfer of knowledge through the introduction of new situations, concepts and knowledge in order to enhance their use of reasoning and critical thinking, taking principles from the classroom and utilizing them in the workplace. Eraut (2004) does support the use of the “practice development role” similar to that of our field placement to ensure “facilitation of continuing learning in the workplace” (p.220).

One way in which social work educators attempt to aid students in applying their social work skills to a practical situation is through the student’s enrollment in field education/ field experience. The intent of field education as defined by CSWE is “to connect the theoretical and conceptual contribution of the classroom with the practical world of the practice setting” (Education Policy, 2008, p.8). It is in their field placement that students should be able to apply their education to real life social work situations. “In the field, students have the opportunity to test what they learn in the classroom; integrate theory with practice; evaluate the effectiveness of interventions; contend with the realities of social, political and economic justice; strive for cultural sensitivity and competence; deliberate on the choices posed by ethical dilemmas; develop a sense of self in practice;

and build a connection to and identify with the profession” (Lager, 2004, p. 3). Lager (2004) goes on, however, to report “gaps in knowledge linking social work curriculum to the field of practice are generally apparent to field educators and field instructors alike, who are often given the responsibility of attempting to fill these gaps during the course of a student’s placement” ( p.3) It is important to explore whether students absorb the knowledge and skills they require or if these gaps exist due to their inability to transfer their knowledge into the practice situation.

There is a lack of research examining the impact of education on bachelor level social work students employment transition. However, Kare Heggen recently completed a study in Norway in which she explored the role of academic knowledge for bachelor level social workers, teachers and nurses in their first year (N=1054), third year (N=955), and three years after finishing college (N=633). She based her questions around the concepts of “academic knowledge, practical skills, values and attitudes and personal capability” which acknowledged that students learn different skills in an educational setting (Heggen, 2007, p.222). Heggen (2007) defined these concepts as:

academics being based in the different academic disciplines – for example, concepts and theories in teaching and scientific literature, often meant for or related to the work setting. With practical skills, they probably associate more concrete and instrumental skills ready for use in practical work. Values and attitudes acquired in college could be of importance when professionals meet clients, pupils or patients. Personal capabilities will probably be associated with more basic personal qualities, often developed through socialization processes also outside of college, such as being a patient or optimistic person, being fond of children, etc. (p. 223).

Heggen’s study identified that students in social work “attach a lower value to ‘academic knowledge’ at the start of their education...and that it declines through college

and is also low three years afterward” when compared to nursing and education students (Heggen, 2007, p.223). She also found that for social workers “relational knowledge is considered the most important type of knowledge three years after education” (Heggen, 2007, p.225). She also found that “one in five social workers said they did not need a college education at all to manage the tasks of their jobs” (Heggen, 2007, p.227). Heggen questions whether educators are making their teaching relevant to social work. In summary, she states, “the main problem seems to be how to organize professional education in a way that will convince students of the value of academic or theoretical knowledge – which is the primary contribution of colleges and universities to professional qualifications” (Heggen, 2007, p.229).

Anthony Pare and Catherine Le Maistre (2006) also completed a qualitative study investigating the school to work transition in the field of social work in Canada. They interviewed 11 baccalaureate social work students (in the final year of their program), nine social work supervisors and five new practitioners (recent graduates of the program). They reported “a central conclusion of our study is that the proficiency gained in the school-to-work transition is accomplished through co-participation – that is, through interaction and cooperation with others, and through full engagement in workplace activity” (Pare and Le Maistre, 2006, p. 364). Themes in their study include: the need for students to become active in their own workplace learning; the importance of a “team” or community in assisting the student to making a smooth transition into practice; the concept of distributed mentoring in which new social workers are guided by many others; and educating new social workers about the role of social work in a changing and

evolving world. Pare and Le Maistre (2006) recommend that university-based educators “point out to students that practice is never as smooth and clear as textbooks may make it seem; help students anticipate the compromises and contradictions that they will face in the field; invite practitioners into the classroom to talk about their work; create opportunities for students to debrief after time spent in the field, perhaps in a public discussion among students, field supervisors, and university faculty” (p. 378).

Constructivism is one theory that can be used to examine the dynamic involved in social work education. In this study, the goal is to examine how students construct their own sense of what is important in what they learn as social work students. The goal is to have students identify what they determine to be the building blocks of their knowledge. Once students enter the workplace it is important that they be able to apply their education and knowledge to the world around them, understanding that “this learning is an ongoing process and never complete” (Trevithick, 2000, p. 2). This transfer of knowledge would allow the social worker to assimilate to situations they encounter. In constructivism “cognitive and deep understanding are the foci: rather than stages being the result of maturation, they are understood as constructions’ of active learner reorganization” (Fosnot and Perry, 2005, p. 11).

Constructivism is linked to Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky and John Dewey. These individuals explored how individuals gain new knowledge through their experiences and in dialogue with others. In constructivist theory, individual learners are viewed as having their own frame of reference, background and culture that influences their learning.

Lev Vygotsky was born in Russia in 1896. He had intended to become a teacher; however, due to his religion and the world at that time he was denied admission to a teaching program. Therefore, he went on to attend two universities, one focusing on law and another on humanities, specifically psychology and philosophy. He eventually was allowed to teach; however, he also continued his studies in the field of psychology. He was appointed to the Institute of Psychology in 1924 in Moscow due to his work in the field of psychology and cognition (Wink & Putney, 2001). His passion was in attempting to understand the role of consciousness in the learning process, and he focused on “applied areas related to cognitive processes, their development and dissolution” (Cole, John-Steiner, Scribner, & Souberman, 1978, p. 10). In his research, Vygotsky focused his studies on examining the application of constructivism to the field of education. He did not focus on learning being the result of biological maturity as did other psychologists in his time, but he held the belief that “pedagogy creates learning processes that lead development and this sequence results in zones of areas of proximal (nearest) development” (Moll, p.50). This is similar to social work education where educators teach concepts and theories that are to lead students to be able to practice and apply these concepts in a work situation. Although Vygotsky did not work in the United States, his work was introduced to American educators around the 1930’s, allowing for a new interpretation of the process of learning and fostering new research in the field of education.

Education is typically thought of in terms of teachers teaching students. Wagner (2007), however, reports that interaction and reciprocity are critical elements in



education. Wagner stated “a learning interaction is considered to be a reciprocal event between the learner and a part of the learning community that brings the learner closer to achieving an education goal” (Wagner as cited in Dennen, Darabi, & Smith, 2007, p. 66). In the quote above, the relationship between the student and the teacher, and the setting in which the relationship takes place plays a key role in the educational process. Again, this focuses on the fact that educators are often role models in their students learning process. Endo and Harpel (1981) stated that “faculty-student interactions have an important impact on student outcomes” (Endo and Harpel, 1981 as cited in Halawah, 2006, p. 676).

Vygotsky noted, “language actively represents two distinct manifestations of the social realm. First, psychological tools (e.g., language, algebraic symbols systems, counting systems, etc.) are all social in the sense that they are products of social / historical/ cultural systems. Other aspects of culture can be what the culture believes is model behavior, how one responds to behaviors, how one’s body movements are interpreted and what is appropriate space in the culture. It is believed individuals have access to these cultural tools through their participation in the cultural practices in which the tools are culturally transmitted” (John-Steiner, Panofsky, Smith and Vygotsky as cited in Putney & Wink, 2002, p.47). One gains knowledge in their culture through their observation and participation in social interactions with peers and adults. One can look at the field of social work as its own culture, a culture which educators intend to pass on to their students. Student’s get their first real immersion in this new culture in the classroom, and it is further reinforced by their field education.

Learning begins when we start to identify concepts and store them in our memory for future recall. When we identify concepts/ tools in the learning process, Vygotsky states we bring the tools to our consciousness allowing us to put them in a useful category to utilize in our learning process. In this sense, we create a system in which to conceptualize our ideas. We cannot master any situation, however, unless we are aware that it exists, and we are aware of what it means to us and others around us. It is up to educators to present situations to students so that students are aware of social work concepts and situations that “exist” so that they can assimilate them into their frame of reference and knowledge base. Vygotsky added another level of development to this process. Vygotsky identified the "law of cultural development" which states: "Any function in the child's cultural development appears twice. . . . First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category" (Vygotsky, as cited in AU, 2007, p. 293). A famous Vygotsky quote sums up his belief “the individual is the social and the social is the individual, and social structures impact the cognitive structures of the individual” (Au, 2007, p. 294). Learning is not complete unless we are aware of a concept; our social world assists us in identifying the concept and assists us in making meaning of and eventually internalizing the meaning of the concept.

This phenomenon would be the same in a university setting. The university is responsible for introducing and socializing the student into the social work culture and profession. A student must become aware of the culture of social work which is created by the university in order to participate fully in the learning process. A student and

teacher must ensure that they are utilizing the same “tools” and framing of their communication to ensure that a comprehensive learning situation can occur. In social work, again it is the use of the professional social work language, communication, building of relationships, defining of terms that educators attempt to transmit to their students. Teachers and students frequently acknowledge this understanding, or lack of understanding, through non-verbal behaviors such as nodding one’s head in agreement or displaying a puzzled facial expression. These opportunities allow students and teachers to ensure agreement about concepts so that the student may fully comprehend the meaning of what is being taught in order to fully comprehend and internalize learning.

Vygotsky stressed that not all environments are determined by their physical context, but from a shared space within the physical context. He points to Rommetveit who recognized that “a listener must create background knowledge as part of ‘what is made known’ in communication” (Rommetveit as cited in Wertsch, 1985, p. 216). Mercer (2000) describes this space as “an intermental development zone (IDZ)” in which “the teacher and learner negotiate their way through the activity in which they are involved. If the quality of the zone is successfully maintained, the teacher can enable a learner to become able to operate just beyond their established capabilities, and to consolidate this experience as new ability and understanding” (Mercer, 2000, as cited in Daniels, 2001, p.124). The teacher is to take all the information the students are providing, along with their own information and the information in the setting in which the learning is occurring, to create an environment of shared understanding. Therefore, students learn from being a part of the process of creating the context together with the

teacher and other students in the direct space in which they are learning. Once students gain this new ability and understand the concepts, they are ready to utilize their knowledge in their field education. Based on this, students learn from being a part of the process of creating the context together with the teacher and the students in the direct space in which they are learning. Once students gain this ability and understand the concepts, they are ready to utilize their knowledge in a new environment, such as a field placement or a work environment.

Of central importance to comprehensive learning is the process of internalization, the dynamic action between thought and language. Vygotsky displayed the relationship of thought and language in his Venn diagram that showed three circles: one circle representing thought, one circle representing language and a circle where the two concepts overlap to demonstrate verbal thought (see Appendix A). Wink and Putney (2002) state that “For Vygotsky, language informed thought, and thought came to life through language. Both thought and language were influenced by our sociocultural experience” (p.43). Vygotsky also focused on the importance of spoken language due to his belief that speech is the main way in which we transfer information to another person (Dahms, 2008). Vygotsky asserted that the “process of speaking itself often serves as a vehicle through which new thoughts emerge” (Smagorinsky, 2007, p. 64). Language is viewed as flowing from cognition. Creating language is a way to share our thoughts, the symbolization of our cognition, with others; therefore allowing others to share their views on our thoughts. As we create this language, we bring our thoughts, conscious and unconscious, to our full awareness, allowing us to change them or adapt them to the

situation. This dynamic process allows for the construction of further thoughts and allows for a higher level of learning. It is through this open dialogue that Vygotsky views learning taking place. This view emphasizes “language is changed as it moves into thought” (and vice-versa). The relationship between thoughts and language is "reciprocal, dynamic and constantly hanging” and that “it is through the fusion of thinking, speaking, and our experience that we construct our knowledge” (Wink & Putney, 2002, p. 43).

Another related concept by Vygotsky is the concept of intersubjectivity, which means, “when the participants in an activity share the same definition of the situation and are aware that they agree on the situation definition” (Dixon-Krauss, 1996, p 116). In the classroom, “intersubjectivity acquires a broader scope to include the interactions and negotiations of meanings between all participants in the interactional spaces, which shift and move within the instructional activity” (Wink & Putney, 2002, p.130). In a classroom setting, students may be interacting with one another, with the teacher, and with other learning materials in the classroom. The classroom activity may be defined in many ways; however, it is through speech that everyone in the classroom creates a sense of a shared concept of what the class believes is occurring, creating a “shared social world, a state of intersubjectivity” (Wersch, 1985, p. 161). Not only may students be working with each other, but also at the same time have an ongoing relationship with the teacher who is ensuring that the process is moving in the proper direction and within the space in which they are working. The teacher is present to provide support and guidance; however, the students are working with each other interactively to solve complex issues.

The students attempt to understand their shared goal in the classroom, through their common language, setting aside their own individual goal, for a broader, more enriched shared learning experience. In this sense, the classroom is a system whereby the sum of the parts is greater than the whole and in which students build on the knowledge and experiences of other students as well as the teachers' knowledge and experiences, allowing for more depth in the learning process.

In applying constructivism to a social work classroom, students would be encouraged to ask questions, of both the teachers and their peers, about concepts new to their frame of reference in an attempt to reorganize and make sense of them. Social work educators are to present social work ideas, values and language to the student so that the student can integrate this information into their own frame of reference for future use. Reflective abstraction is an important concept in this regard. Students must learn to “organize and generalize across experiences in a representational form” (Fosnot and Perry, 2005, p. 34).

Vygotsky also stressed the importance of social interactions within the classroom. In the educational setting, he stated the overall goal of education is “to generate and lead development which is the result of social learning through internalization of culture and social relationships” (Vygotsky as cited by Dahms, 2008, p. 1). Proximity to one another is viewed as crucial; and the face to face classroom can bring individuals together to create a stronger shared experience. A goal of the teacher should be to create a safe environment in which students can openly discuss issues, both with the teacher and with others. The teacher then needs to challenge the thought processes of students, through

the use of language, in order for students to gain knowledge and to develop higher level thinking. One way to do this is to have students work directly together in order to share their thoughts and language so that they can build on one another's thoughts in a continuous learning process. Dixon- Krause (1996) explained that Vygotsky used the concept of the collaborative group in reference to "a group of students with varying abilities working together to solve a problem or complete a project (p.79)" which "turns into a web of related individual growth in a larger social complex" (p. 80). Students are able to build on the learning of other students in the classroom, therefore a collective process. Social interaction leads to increased learning as individuals share their new thoughts through their language and continue to change their thoughts based on the response of their peers and others. A teacher is able to enhance their social interactions further by bringing in guest lecturers or visitors to the classroom. Through this experience, students are provided opportunities to create a shared experience with another professional which may lead to new learning opportunities, both in and out of the classroom.

The process as identified above is what Vygotsky describes as Higher Mental Functioning. Vygotsky states that "Any higher mental function necessarily goes through an external stage in its development because it is initially a social function" and then associates "voluntary attention, logical memory, the formation of concepts, and the development of volition" as appearing on the "social plane" before being internalized, which, following his logic, are defined as "higher mental functions" themselves. (Vygotsky as cited in Au, 2007, p. 293). Vygotsky identifies higher mental functioning as

not being able to occur without a social function from which we bring our thoughts to awareness for confirmation and for development. Our thoughts are impacted by the social meaning others ascribe to them. This creates a link between the individual and others in their society through their shared and agreed upon knowledge of the thought. The individual can also focus their attention at this level of their thoughts and the individual can learn to master those thoughts.

Another concept developed by Vygotsky is that of the Zone of Proximal Development. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky as cited by Wink & Putney, 2002, p. 86). There is not just one ZPD in a classroom at a time, but multiple ZPD’s overlapping in the same environment. The teacher not only needs to assess what each student’s learning abilities are at their current developmental level but also must assess what the students are capable of learning at their full potential. The goal would be to provide the students with activities beyond their range of experience. The ZPD is when a student experiences a phenomenon / problem as part of their instructional activities. Social interaction with the teacher or peers aid the student in understanding the phenomenon / problem so that they may ultimately learn how to apply their own knowledge to a situation without continual need for guidance. In ZPD, each student is looked at individually, at their own level of development. This theory does not assume that every student is at the same level. The teacher is actively engaged in the learning process to



ensure he/ she provides the right amount of support , education or guidance to ensure that each student will be able to perform on their own so that they can move to the next developmental level in their learning process. Field educators play a similar role in engaging in the learning process with the student to aid in their development and growth. The process of providing students with the activities necessary for growth is referred to as scaffolding, which can be a learning task or collaborative dialogue. Vygotsky states there are three levels of learning: past learning which is the actual developmental level, present learning which is the ZPD, and future learning which is the potential developmental level. A student is pushed to their full potential by having access to someone who is more knowledgeable than themselves, such as the educator or field instructor, who will push them to a higher level of thinking through providing that modeling, understanding, or new skills. The student may initially struggle with understanding; however, it is through active guidance and support by the teacher or someone more capable that the student eventually grasps concepts. In the same sense, teachers also learn by observing their students. By watching their students, the teacher can gather information to develop the next class activity or learning plan. They can discern the next logical steps to take. Tappan also cites Rogoff who reported that “sometimes forms of communication other than language (i.e. non-verbal forms of communication) serve to mediate and shape the dialogic interactions that occur in the ZPD” (Rogoff as cited in Tappan, 1998 p. 146). An example of this would be a teacher who uses silence to draw out responses from the class or who looks at a capable student as a sign for the student to share their thoughts.

Lastly, one must be aware of the impact of the brain on student recall. As stated in the theory of constructivism, for students to transfer knowledge, it must be remembered. Students construct their memory through their processes of attention (acknowledging new information exists), encoding (taking the information and transforming it into a memory state), rehearsal (repeating the new information), elaboration (apply new information to new situations) and consolidation (transforming into a permanent memory record) (Byrnes, 2001). When students enter the workplace, they are expected to recall information that has been consolidated into their memory or constructed in their memory in order to apply to their new learning experience, their employment. Some variables that may impact a student's ability to recall information are the amount of time repeating the new information in the rehearsal stage, the amount of times they applied the material in a classroom setting, the ability to apply the knowledge to information they already know (building on knowledge) and also the time between learning the information and having to recall it, among many others. This information is important in understanding recall; however, it is not as significant when applying the theory of constructivism as learning is not viewed so much as a single event but more as a process in which concepts are initially introduced and then built upon.

Vygotsky's theories allow social work educators to examine their teaching in a new context in which educators view themselves as leading a process of development in students that begins in the classroom and continues as a lifelong process for the student. By examining which social work concepts, course content and experiences students identify as being the foundation for this learning process, educators can begin to focus on

how to best aid the student in their learning process. Too often, educators become focused on producing an end product in their classrooms instead of viewing the classroom experience as a development level in a learning process that continues for social work students in their field environment and eventually into their work environment.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Design**

This is a qualitative study aimed at identifying the key educational experiences that graduated bachelor level social workers identify as being most helpful to them in their current social work careers. The design is exploratory in nature. The social workers were asked to describe their educational experiences and their beliefs about how those experiences support them in their current careers in social work. The social workers participated in phenomenological in-depth interviews in which each participant was asked specific core questions exploring their individual educational experiences.

However, the researcher was also allowed to be flexible in order to allow the participant to explain their learning experience in depth and to discuss how they perceived their experience. Research participants were encouraged to describe their individual learning experiences and to discuss what aided them in being able to transfer their classroom knowledge into their current work settings. These interviews followed the interview-guided approach in which the questions and topic were developed prior to the interviews occurring; however, the social workers were encouraged to expand on and digress from these questions in order to fully explain their experiences.

The qualitative method was chosen in order to gain an understanding of those educational experiences that social workers identify as being the most critical to their

career. In qualitative studies, research is more flexible and it is intended to explore concepts more fully, providing more depth into the areas being researched. Social workers completed in-depth face to face interviews in which they were allowed to describe their learning experiences in their educational programs in their own words. An in-depth interview allowed the social workers to define concepts in their own terms and did not limit the responses that the social workers provided.

A weakness of this approach is that personal interviews can be subjective in nature, rely on the subject's willingness to answer questions and can be time consuming. Subjectivity occurs as the participants were asked to define and explain their experiences in their own words, some of which are difficult to explain or put into words or which may be difficult to recall.

The subjective nature of an interview, however, can also be a strength in that it allows the researcher to gather a depth of information that is difficult to gain with quantitative measures. The subjects provide information based on their own personal experiences "which allow the researcher to understand the meanings that every day activities hold for people" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 102). Interviews also allow for immediate follow-up and clarification of the subject matter from which the researcher can then expand on in order to gather further data, making the process richer and more comprehensive.

### **Participants**

Twenty social workers, three male and seventeen female, were solicited from social work agencies in Wisconsin and Minnesota that hire bachelor level social workers.

These agencies agreed to allow for recruitment of their staff via agency posting or emails. These agencies included human service departments, group homes, nursing homes, etc. In this study male and females who graduated from a CSWE accredited, bachelor level, social work program in the last 4 to 24 months who are currently working in a social work agency for minimally three months were asked to voluntarily participate in the study. The four to twenty-four month timeframe was chosen in an attempt to control for learning and recall, recognizing that recall becomes more difficult the further the time between learning information and having to recall the information. This time frame, however, allowed participants to have some time in their agencies in which to identify how their undergraduate social work education has impacted their employment. Participants were obtained after they responded to a flyer posted or an email sent to their agency or following a referral from a peer. The snowballing technique was also employed as initial participants of the study referred colleagues and prior classmates to the study. All participants were screened to ensure they are working in a social work setting and are not currently enrolled in a Master's program in order to control for the variable of learning social work skills from other sources.

Demographic data was collected on each of the participants (see Appendix B). This information included: age, gender, race, time since graduating from a BSW program, time at employment, type of social work school program (public versus private, face to face versus online) and type of work setting. This information was not utilized for data analysis but provided for an enhanced description of the subjects. The age range of the participants was 22-30 with the average age of participants being 24.05 years. The

participants, at the time of their interview, had worked from 4 months to 12 months, with the average length of time at their place of employment being 6.7 months. The participants represented eight fields of social work, including family and children services (10 participants), emergency service social work which included housing, food and referral services (3 participants), geriatric social work (2 participants), hospice social work (1 participant), juvenile corrections (1 participant), rehabilitative social work (1 participant), mental health social work (1 participant) and work with developmentally disabled adults (1 participant). The participants had been out of school from 4 months to 22 months, with the average length of time since graduation being 9.95 months. The participants represented ten different social work programs, three of which were located at private colleges and seven which were located at public colleges.

The negative of participating in this study for the social workers was the time required to participate in the interview once they were selected. Interviews lasted for a time frame of fifty minutes to two hours. However, a positive was that the social workers were given the opportunity to tell us, in their own words, the benefits and negatives of their social work learning in order to have the opportunity to give feedback to social work educators to enhance social work education in the future.

Strengths of the sample is that interviewing social workers in a variety of agencies allowed the researcher the opportunity to examine different aspects of the social work field, each social worker having their own unique job responsibilities and experiences. It also allowed the researcher to examine the impact of their educational experiences on the actual work they are performing, with each social worker's work being different.

A limitation in the sample is that all participants were recruited from agencies within Wisconsin and Minnesota; however, based on CSWE accreditation requirements for the majority of bachelor level social work programs, it is believed that the social workers should have received similar education. Another limitation is interviewing social workers who practice in different work environments, such as child protective services or homelessness, made it difficult to control for any intervening variables from their work environment that may influence their current learning.

### **Ethical Issues**

Prior to beginning any interviews, institutional review board approval was obtained from Loyola University Chicago to ensure all research was completed according to ethical guidelines. Once the participants were identified, they were provided with a full explanation of the purpose and procedure of the study. They were then provided with consent forms, in language they could understand, informing them of how the information obtained will be utilized, explaining confidentiality and agreeing to participate in the study. They were also provided with a consent form allowing the researcher to audiotape the interview. The participants must have agreed to and signed consents prior to their involvement in the study (See Appendix C). They were also informed of how to terminate their involvement in the study. The participant was also given a participant identification number, instead of utilizing their names, to ensure their information would not be identifiable to others so their anonymity can be maintained. This information was entered into a secure, confidential computer, which was backed up on disks that will be locked in a secure testing file. The researcher will be the only person



with access to the student names. All information will be kept in a locked confidential area for ten years, after which time it will be destroyed.

In selection of participants, the researcher was committed to doing no harm to the participants. In this research there appears to be no negative consequences to the social workers for participating in the study. The research is not on a topic that is identified as inducing distress on social workers as it is just asking them to describe their social work education experiences. The subjects were all over the age of 18 and therefore were able to give voluntary consent. Due to their status as college graduates, it was also expected, and the participants confirmed, that they had the ability to read and understand the consents.

A focus group sample was gathered to aid in the development of the final interview-guide measure. These participants were provided the same ethical considerations as the participants in the actual study in that they were explained the purpose of the study and signed consents for participation. They also signed consent to be audio taped since this allowed the researcher with the ability to go back and listen to the session to ensure information was heard and written accurately. The focus group was a sample of convenience in that it contained recent graduates of a social work bachelor's program from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

### **Measures**

Prior to beginning any interviews, the researcher developed an interview-guided questionnaire which was initially developed based on the literature and practice wisdom. The interview-guide was refined based on the feedback of the focus group prior to asking any questions in the face to face interviews (see Appendix D). The researcher asked

questions about the participant's education including classroom experience, assignments, advisor experience, field experience, any online education experience, how they were able to transfer their social work education to their current social work job setting, etc... The participants were asked to describe any critical event, as determined by the participant that led to their being able to absorb and transfer their knowledge, values and skills from the classroom into the work environment.

Initially, the questions were given to a focus group in order to get feedback regarding what specific questions to ask, to determine new questions that need to be asked, to sharpen and enhance questions prior to presenting to the research participants and to ensure the questions clarity and accuracy. The focus group consisted of 8 social workers who graduated from a social work bachelor program within the last 6 months prior to the focus group. The focus group interview was an interview-guided session; however, it was informal in nature in order to elicit information and allow participants to open up about their comments. Again, a goal was to be able to determine which specific questions would be the most helpful in determining the transfer of knowledge from a social work bachelor program to the work setting.

A limitation of creating a questionnaire is that there are no measures of reliability to ensure our questions measure what we want them to actually measure. There is also no study of validity on the questions. In order to gain increased reliability and validity, the researcher audio- taped the sessions in order to go back and crosscheck for discrepancies. The researcher increased reliability by involving two other researchers, both Loyola

University of Chicago PhD social work students, who reviewed the data taking into account interrater reliability.

### **Procedure**

Once selected, the participants were interviewed at a pre-determined place as identified by the participant on a date agreed upon by the participant and researcher. The researcher interviewed the participant for a one-time period ranging from forty-five to ninety minutes. The researcher audio taped the sessions to ensure accuracy of the data. Immediately following the interview, the researcher wrote down significant information such as immediate perceptions on the content, the tone of the interview, body language of the subject, insights, etc. This information was provided to all evaluators for further evaluation and to determine the application of this information. The researcher also transcribed the interviews immediately following the interviews. The researcher double checked the transcriptions against the audio-recording following the initial transcription to ensure accuracy.

### **Data Management**

Once the interviews were completed, the transcriptions were provided separately to two other researchers for coding. Coding involves “reducing narrative data to conceptual categories into which parts of the text can be grouped and in terms of which the text can be described or displayed” (Anastas, 1999, p.419). In coding the data, the researcher looked for themes of ideas and groups of data with similar definitions for themes. Codes should all include the following: a label or name, a definition of what the theme contains, a description on how to know when the theme occurs, a description of

any qualifications or exclusions to the identification of the theme and examples of the different codes. Not all codes were identified at the beginning of the study; however, codes evolved through the analysis of the information. In order to enhance reliability or “the consistency (or replicability) with which observations are made” (Anastas, 1999, p. 70), the primary researcher and two other researchers analyzed the data. In this case, the primary researcher and two outside coders, both PhD social work students from Loyola University of Chicago, coded the same sections of the interview transcriptions. All of the researchers involved in coding received the same transcriptions and same training to ensure that they are all coding the same material and are coding information in the same manner. The goal was to have high interobserver reliability (consensus on meaning and value in statements provided to the primary researcher in the interviews). Construct validity occurs when the researchers are provided with anchors for coding and rating their observations. An example of some of the coded areas identified early on in the research through the literature review as key components in examining the impact of education on a social workers current profession included: field placement, advising, role-plays in class, knowledge from classroom content areas (such as Human Behavior and the Social Environment, Social Work Practice, Research, Policy, etc.), service learning / volunteer experiences, interaction with student social work groups, relationships with educators, out of classroom assignment, etc. Once the researchers completed their coding, the qualitative results were also inputted into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis program, to validate the coding results.

## **Data Analysis**

The researcher in this study utilized NVivo, after obtaining appropriate training, in order to assist in the coding process. Once the data was coded, NVivo was used to organize the codes into a visual, which allowed for understanding the relationship between codes and to search for segments that contain multiple codes. The codes group data into broader themes. These themes provided answers to the research question. There is no limitation as to the amount of codes developed; however, they should aim to capture the major ideas and meaning of the information. When coding, the researcher was careful to not “check out” in that they miss codes due to being overwhelmed with the amount of material the researcher is analyzing. It was important to develop an audit trail to ensure other researchers could review any data collected. Validity in qualitative research is important as it assures the accuracy of the information obtained.

Analyzing data in qualitative research is not a clear-cut process. Codes are eventually examined by looking at the different groups of concepts and their frequency in order to draw conclusions. These groupings are put together into meaningful chunks and interpretation by the researcher. One way in which individuals do this is to create graphs comparing the findings of the qualitative data with the quantitative data. The researcher wants to display the information in a way that convinces the reader that the themes evolved from the research.

In the final steps of the research process, the researchers ensured that they have fully recorded the process for their research. It is important to leave an audit trail to ensure that others may confirm our findings or repeat our study with other populations

and to build on the researchers' credibility. Further studies will be important to broadening the validity and reliability of this study to make it generalizable to more populations.

### **Limitations**

Although this study is examining a range of social workers from different schools and in different practice fields, the results of this research were based on information from only those social workers who choose to participate, limiting our sample size. The research was only completed on bachelor level CSWE accredited schools in Wisconsin and Minnesota. Due to these two issues, the results of this study are not able to be generalized to all BSW programs. Lastly, it is important to note that the researcher did not control for how the social workers current agency is influencing the social workers learning / application of social work concepts. This area would need further evaluation.

### **Contribution to Social Work**

It is important that social work educators continue to examine how social work students learn and how effective we are in educating them. Social work is a dynamic field that is constantly changing to meet the needs of society. Educators must ensure that they are providing the student with the proper foundation from which they can build and transfer their knowledge, values and skills in order to excel in their role as social workers. With students being stakeholders in the educational process, it is essential we hear from them about what they identify as being critical in their ability to build on their social work educational foundation once they enter the work world to ensure we are giving students the proper tools in the educational process. Educators must be willing to

examine a wide range of evaluation measures if we are to improve on the educational process and to enhance social work practices in the classroom, leading to better social work professionals.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESEARCH FINDINGS

#### **Introduction to Findings**

In this chapter the results of the qualitative interviews which give clear direction to the answer of the research question as to what social work knowledge, values and skills bachelor level social worker learn in their undergraduate education that they apply to their current jobs will be provided. As the results were analyzed, key focus areas and themes emerged. The results of the study identify four main areas of learning: inherent qualities the social workers identified that they brought into their social work education, processes that occurred in their undergraduate school setting that allowed them to learn information, the outcomes of this learning and their internships (see Appendix E). Within these four main areas, key themes surfaced which will be described below.

#### **Inherent Qualities**

All twenty social workers reported they believed they had inherent qualities / traits that they brought into their social work education. Although no main themes emerged among the traits, many of the traits identified are traits typically associated with social workers. The United States Department of Labor states that social workers should be “emotional, mature, objective, and sensitive to people and their problem. They must be able to handle responsibility, work independently and maintain good working



relationships with clients and coworkers” (Bureau of Labor Statistics, NP). The primary traits identified by the social workers were being caring (n=6), being non-judgmental (n=5), being helpful or having a desire to help (n=5), being patient (n=5) and being empathetic (n=4). One social worker described specific traits she believed social workers should possess:

I think that people need specific qualities to be a social worker. I have a ton of patience. The empathy, the caring, the wanting to help. I want to see others succeed. I could have picked a different career that would have made more money but at the end of the day if I helped someone that is what I want. (SW 10)

Another social worker described her characteristics in the following manner,

I genuinely care about helping people and I would say I am pretty sociable. I like helping people and want to be around people. (I am) willing to push myself. People say I am a good listener so that helps. I hope I am a nice person so people want to talk to me about issues. I like helping people and being around them. I try to be nice all the time. (SW20)

Another social worker discussed her views on the importance of being non-judgmental:

I think I am very accepting. I am pretty much – I like diversity and I like the whole celebrate diversity thing. Very non-judgmental. I am always the person that listens and I have had – I remember having a teacher tell me write down why you want to be a social worker and don’t say you want to help people. That was interesting. I like to listen and I think I listen non-judgmentally. (SW 16)

Lastly a social worker discussed his view of the importance of relationships and wanting to help others:

I think I have a personal quality of wanting to invest in relationships. Going through the program and continuing today I feel that it is a foundation as far as wanting to invest in others for the wellness of them and also the wellness of the culture, wellness of society, wellness of myself. I think the desire to grow – I feel it comes from being blessed by the impact others have on me. I think a lot of times as the social worker or the “helper” we are the helper or person with resources or power and we are helping the client who is powerless or doesn’t have any resources and doesn’t have the ability but I tend to look at it as more of an

equal relationship where I am growing so much to the exposure and different types of situations so I think I have grown so much in the past year being out of school but then three years being in school. That is the biggest thing. (SW 17)

The social workers reported they believe they had these traits prior to entering a social work educational program, some of which they think were developed through their life experiences. They also acknowledged that they were assisted in identifying and labeling these traits through talking about them or identifying them as a part of their social work education. One social worker identified how she learned the definition of traits that she believed she possessed:

I don't think I would have said I was empathetic until I learned what that meant. After you learn about social work you learn some more qualities that you might have already had! (SW 18)

One social worker identified specific classes in which she learned about how her or others life experiences could impact them in the profession:

I know in our social work ethics, our intro, and interpersonal skills (classes), they really let us kind of identify any of our deficiencies and where we needed to grow, and a lot of times people didn't realize you know that they had harbored maybe like internalized racism or homophobia. Things like that would come out and it was like wow, who would have thought that in the field that that would be an issue. Or even just, a lot of people come into social work because of their own experience with the profession of social work, whether they as children were involved with social workers or they had family, friends or relatives, or maybe they had previous AODA issues and stuff and then we come into that and we think that's all we're going to do or, so you just have to be aware of it and be comfortable with it, I guess. (SW 12)

One social worker stated it was her educator's feedback in class that made her realize what traits she had:

I remember (my professor) saying that there are some areas that you're obviously stronger in than others. Or, she might say you might not be the best writer but if you look at yourself in that video tape, you're a natural. You know what I mean.

Just giving examples like that. Not in a you're good at this and bad in this type of way, but just tell you what you need to build on. You are great at this; you're doing an excellent job. I guess education made me realize what things I really need to work. There is something that I always need to work on. (SW3)

The social workers in general discussed the importance of having the traits / characteristics that they had prior to their education, such as their ability to listen or to be empathetic, identified as social work traits through their educational experiences. Even if they did not know the specific name or label for their trait prior to beginning their social work program, they believed their education assisted them in being able to name the traits they already possessed. They stated, due to this, they were able to develop this trait further or were provided insight into how to enhance or modify to their traits to make them better social workers.

### **Process Themes**

The social workers identified three main themes in relation to how they learned the information they needed to be successful in their current employment. These themes include learning from their social work classes, involvement in volunteering, service groups or other organizations while in school and learning from their peers / others in their cohort.

#### **Learning from Social Work Classes.**

The social workers acknowledged three themes that assisted in their learning in their social work classes. These themes are: service learning, interaction with educators, and being provided with hands-on learning assignments.

### *Service Learning.*

The first theme was being required to be involved in service learning as a requirement of their education /social work classes. Lemieux & Allen (2007) define service learning as “a pedagogical approach that integrates community service with academic study to promote student reflection, critical thinking, and creative problem solving” (p. 309). It is important to distinguish service learning from the field placement/ internship and from volunteering. King (2003) describes a continuum developed by Robert Sigmon in which he refers to in order to address the three concepts. He states that volunteering is at one end of a spectrum and describes as focusing “on primarily providing services that benefits the community” (p. 39) Service learning is identified as being in the center of the continuum and has an “equal emphasis on service and academics” (p. 39). Service learning benefits the student as the student is encouraged, through an educational requirement, to get experience in the community. Service learning is focused more on this experience and not so much in the development of professional skills. King (2003) identifies an internship as being at the other end of the continuum which requires the student to use professional skills and “promotes academic development” (p. 39). Eighteen of the social workers identified their service learning experience as being supportive to their current employment and their current skills. One social worker described her social work learning experience:

You were working directly with them (other social workers) and you were seeing and hearing what they experience on a daily basis and the obstacles that they faced. I really appreciated that and I enjoyed that work a lot because that is what gets lost under the paperwork and dealing with the legalities and technicalities of everything. (SW1)

Social workers also reported that their service learning aided in helping them identify what fields of social worker they would or would not like to work in:

The nursing home was cute but not what I wanted to do. It showed me what I didn't want to do. (SW19)

Another social worker talked about what she learned from her service learning experience:

When you are doing things like that you see the struggles of others – not just hearing it. It was extremely important. I was part of the nursing home visitation program. You gain relationships but it is hard when something happens to them. Glad to have the opportunity though. I did that for a semester – once a week for about an hour. After working with the teen moms – it taught me I wanted to be involved with them. I want to be involved in adoption someday. (SW20)

This social worker identified how her service learning experience helped to connect her directly with clients in order to better understand their situation:

I think that it (service learning) did (help) because it was actually working directly with kids. It wasn't just working with the parents of the kids or foster parents, you were directly working with them and you were seeing and hearing what the experience on a daily basis and the obstacles that they faced. I really appreciated that and I enjoyed that work a lot because that gets lost under the paperwork and dealing with the legalities and technicalities of everything. (SW1)

The service learning opportunities allowed the social workers the chance to learn about the field of social work, connect with other social workers, and to introduce them to different populations they may come in contact with as they enter the field of social work in order to assist them in determining which social work job they may want to take as a social worker in the future.

### ***Interactions with Educators.***

The second theme that emerged under the theme of learning from social work classes was the social workers' interactions with their educators. As part of the interview,

the social workers were asked to identify classes that were beneficial to their education and to also discuss anything or anyone that impacted their education. In discussing their classes, many social workers discussed the traits / behaviors of the educator instead of the content of the classes, indicating that the traits / behaviors of the educator impacted their ability to be stimulated, to retain or to learn material. One social worker who was asked if there were classes that were not helpful responded and demonstrated this belief through his statement:

I think it was more to do with the individual (professor) than it was the actual content of the course. (SW 12)

Several social workers identified being negatively impacted due to issues in the educator's life impacting the classroom.

The professor was going through a lot so we didn't get much out of it (the class) other than the paper. (SW19)

Another reported:

I didn't have a very good experience in that class. We had four different professors because our professor got sick. (SW1)

Despite this, overall social workers reported more positive interactions with their educators than negative interaction. All twenty social workers identified a minimum of one positive interaction, and others reported more, for a total of 97 positive interactions with their educators that they believe supported their education and ultimately their current skills, values and knowledge. One social worker described her experience:

She (the professor) did a really good job. She wasn't shaming, she didn't make you feel embarrassed in front of the class...but she had this way of pointing out what you could have done better...she was pretty dynamic" (SW13)

Another social worker shared, “she was a tough professor and demanded critical thinking” (SW18).

Fourteen of the social workers identified a minimum of one negative interaction with an educator, for a total of 22 negative interactions, which they deemed ultimately negatively impacted their ability to learn in the classroom. One social worker described his negative experience as:

Most of the discussion was above all of our heads, if you could follow him at all...I know most of the students were sitting there thinking ‘I am not getting a lot out of this’ and not connecting (SW6)

The experiences of these social workers highlight the importance of educators understanding their impact on their students learning. Students look to educators to provide a classroom learning experience which will enable them to learn.

One set of relationships that was identified as significant by the focus group, was that of the social worker and her / his advisor. However, in this research, the social workers did not discuss any information about their relationships with their advisors until directly asked about this relationship. Out of the twenty social workers, only eight identified their advisors as having a positive impact on their current roles as social workers. Of those eight, six reported that their advisor was also one of their educators or field liaisons, which allowed them to build a stronger relationship with the person. One social worker defined her relationship with her advisor in the following way:

I thought she was wonderful, because in college it’s a big adjustment to go and do for yourself, there are no teachers asking you to do stuff. She was really helpful in laying out the classes that I need and she was kinda taking into account what I’m interested in, into the classes, which I think was unique to find. And I always saw her twice a semester, a lot of people don’t see their advisor but I wanted to make sure that I got the right classes so I graduate and everything. (SW1)

Another social worker, who also had her advisor as her field liaison stated:

They definitely helped you explore kind of what your strengths are. I kind of remember when we applied for our field placement you actually kind of got to pick it, almost, but you more put down what you actually kind of saw yourself doing, maybe what kind of clientele, what setting, that kind of thing, and they really helped you explore that. (SW 12)

Lastly, a social worker who also had their advisor as a teacher said:

My advisor was always there (for support) – “how are you doing?” I could go to her and openly talk, she was my professor too. We were in a lot of contact and I had a small school. (SW 19).

A main theme among the social workers who reported their advisors did not have an impact on their educational experience were those who reported that they had to switch advisors. Of the 12 social workers who reported their advisors had no impact, seven reported that they had to switch advisors during their education. One social worker stated:

I think I had three advisors. One moved to another school. I didn't think I had a good bond because I switched so much. (SW 4)

Another stated:

My advisor kept changing every year. Our director passed away and then a bunch of faculty left. My two teachers helped me more than my advisors. (SW5).

It appears that the social workers who identified their advisors as having a positive impact on their careers as social workers were those social workers who were able to build a relationship with their advisor. These relationships were enhanced when the social worker had their advisor as a teacher or field liaison which allowed for enhanced interactions with their advisor outside of their advising relationship. In



addition, the social workers identified that switching advisors disrupted their ability to form relationships with their advisors.

### *Hands-On Exercises.*

Another theme identified under learning in the classroom was the application of hands-on exercises in the classroom in which the social workers as students actively practiced the social work skills they were learning. All twenty social workers recalled the significance of practicing interviewing skills, either in the classroom or through video-taped interviews, or the use of role-plays in which they would act out social work situations with their peers in their classroom settings. One social worker who was asked if there were specific exercises or homework that she currently applies to her job reported:

The video tape. It kind of sets the path for what to expect in the future and how to go over confidentiality and how to make the clients feel comfortable when you first meet with them...Having to get outside of your shell and really apply what you read and what you learn instead of copying words verbatim and following a script of what you are doing. Kind of like the simulation of what we are doing. (SW7)

Another social worker stated:

In that interviewing lab, we actually did actual interviews that we taped, and then we would process them in class. We wrote feedback for each other to see how we did as the worker and then also how we felt the worker did when we portrayed the client. That one I felt was really useful. (SW12)

Other social workers discussed the importance they felt in participating in role play activities in the class. One stated:

I can remember a lot of the role playing and just how to interact with a client; the skills...role plays were helpful because you got over the fear of saying things out loud. (SW18)

In addition, twelve of the social workers acknowledged other hands-on exercises which included interviewing others in the community, being involved in community education events, completing community agency evaluations or visiting resources in the community. In these situations the social workers had taken a lead role in practicing their skills of interviewing, educating and learning about community resources. One social worker described a community project she participated in as part of her methods class:

I learned a lot with a group project that we did. That was really nice – we did a whole social action project – it was really, really hard but really worth it. We did a project in Outreach on tenant’s rights in a specific location in Milwaukee and then we talked to different agencies that are having tenant problems or visa-versa problems with their landlords. Unfortunately when we finally got everything all said and done, nobody showed up. We learned when to have it, work together as a team, pull each other’s strengths out, and how we can all get on each other’s nerves but especially being a new social worker you are going to have to do a lot of that and I am interested in community work. (SW9)

Another social worker discussed a project she was given to interview a social worker from another country:

But one thing that sticks out in my mind is that she had us do an interview with international social worker, in a podcast. So, I like I interviewed, we had to find the person on our own, so I researched and I found somebody who is from Uganda. I even e-mailed for a couple months afterwards. We just gained knowledge from them and then we would have to present it to the class. It was cool because we get to meet someone internationally, we learned about podcast, which was really cool. (SW 3)

In general, social work students identified their methods and practice classes as the main classes in which they practiced role plays and interviewing or in which they utilized hands-on exercises. The social workers were asked to describe which classes they believed were most helpful to their education and the methods and practice classes were the most frequently discussed. However, it was difficult to quantify this material as it

became clear that universities presented in this research study had varied curricula, especially in relation to the methods and practice classes. These classes varied not only by content but by name, the length of the class (one semester or two) and the level (micro, mezzo, or macro) social work addressed.

The second group of classes that was most frequently identified was the human behavior class (es) where the social workers discussed practicing writing genograms or eco-maps.

Eight of the social workers, when asked what classes they do not believe were helpful to their education, identified their research class. The social workers had difficulty identifying exercises from these classes that they utilize today; however, despite this, several social workers did discuss the value of writing research papers which will be discussed further in this paper.

### **Involvement in Volunteering, Service Groups or Campus Organizations.**

The next theme that emerged was the value that social workers identified through their involvement in volunteering, service groups or campus organizations. Seventeen of the social workers reported that they believe they developed and enhanced their social work skills through their involvement in volunteering, service groups and / or campus organizations. Sixteen of the social workers stated they actively volunteered, above and beyond their classroom service learning requirements. One social worker discussed the importance of volunteering stating “it just really made me more aware of the importance of community resources” (SW3). Another social worker identified how volunteering led to her beginning to get clarity of the population she wanted to work with once she

graduated. She stated “that is where I started to say, hey I like working with vulnerable children, disadvantaged youth” (SW6.)

Sixteen social workers reported engaging in service groups or organizations on their campus. Through these groups, the social workers were required as students to be involved in activities in the community outside of their social work classes. One social worker was able to identify how belonging to a sorority enhanced her social work skills. She stated:

I was in a sorority...and I was an educator so I did a presentation on anti-hazing which helped me on my training part now. It helped me, in that perspective, get used to that (presenting). (SW8)

Another social worker discussed his tutoring experience:

I did tutoring...It helped with communication again, you know and just understanding children a bit better. That helped. (SW15)

The social workers realized the importance of other activities outside of their social work classes that taught them about working with others, themselves and their communities. Although not all of the interviewees were required to be active in volunteering, service groups or organization outside of their social work classes, they sought these opportunities out on their own and recognized the value of doing so and the positive impact it has had on their current social work occupations.

### **Interaction with Peers / Cohort.**

Another theme that emerged was the value the social workers identified in learning from other social work students who they took classes with or who they engaged with outside of the classroom. Despite varying class sizes (one social worker reported a cohort of ten students and another reported a cohort of over fifty students) a majority

talked about the value in being able to discuss class concepts or experiences with their social work education peers. Fifteen of the social workers discussed learning directly from their peers or others in their cohort. They report this learning occurred during classroom discussion and / or during informal meetings outside of the classroom. One social worker reported:

They would observe and video tape behind a mirror and provide feedback. (SW4)

She talked about how this feedback was valuable to her making changes in her interviewing skills in order to be a better social worker. Another social worker shared her thoughts on her peers:

But, I would say, yeah, I learned from everyone, even my peers and my cohort, like in my social work classes. We were just very supportive. We were a very close group; it was nice to have that support. (SW3)

Another shared the value of their internship class in which they were able to process internship experiences in a classroom setting in order to learn from each other. She stated:

We learned about what other people (peers) were learning in their internships. What issues they were facing and ethical dilemmas. (SW9)

Another discussed the importance of learning as a group.

I think the biggest thing was working as a class. Really learning from each other. We were a close class. Help each other learn as well as yourself. (SW11)

The social workers acknowledged varying contact with their classmates / cohorts at this time in their careers. One social worker reported getting together with her cohort still once a month to discuss social work issues and to share life experience. Another reported no contact with her peers since graduation. Despite this, the social workers

acknowledged that while in school they found value in learning from and developing relationships with other social work students.

### **Outcome Themes**

As a result of their educational experiences, the social workers identified four main areas of learning: interviewing skills, writing skills, learning core social work values, and social workers awareness of self and its applicability to social work.

#### **Interviewing Skills.**

The main skill that social workers identified learning as a result of their social work classes was that of interviewing. Eighteen of the twenty social workers reported the significance of learning interviewing and communication skills such as reframing, paraphrasing, summarizing and listening. One social worker shared:

I learned open-ended questions and closed-ended questions, reframing, transitioning, paraphrasing, summarizing. Techniques like that. (SW3)

Another social worker discussed learning about interviewing by participating in an interviewing lab class:

In that interviewing lab, we actually did actual interviews that we taped, and then we would process them in class. We wrote feedback for each other to see how we did as the worker and then also how we felt the worker did when we portrayed the client. That one I felt was really useful. (SW12)

One of the social workers discussed utilizing interviewing skills with kids:

Working with the kids I think going back to the interviewing techniques and making sure I ask them open-ended questions not just a yes or no answer. Getting them to tell how they are feeling. I think having that empathy and dignity and worth of a person. Not judging them or anything like that. I think those are the main ones. Asking questions how they are feeling – not giving advice – interviewing is the crucial part of it. (SW10).

### **Writing Skills.**

Social workers frequently talk about the large amount of paperwork required in their jobs. Seventeen of the social workers interviewed discussed the importance of learning documentation or writing skills in their education. They identified learning writing skills ranging from filling out basic documentation to writing detailed papers.

One social worker stated:

They (the professors) just drilled in our head document, document, document. They said if you didn't document then it didn't happen. That is all I did at work. With every contact with every resident, I document. (SW3)

Another social worker talked about learning how to do more technical writing. She reported:

Basic listening and documentation. Learning how to be very objective – writing case notes and making sure they are what we observed and I think we learned that in a lot of classes. (SW4)

Another social worker discussed writing skills in general that she learned in college.

Well, I guess that all the papers that I had to write in college really relate, you know, to writing like a court report. You need good grammar. You need to know how to word things in a professional manner. (SW15)

Good writing skills are essential in the field of social work. The social workers identified needing these skills to be effective in completing requirements of their jobs, including basic agency forms, case notes and court reports.

### **Social Work Core Values.**

All twenty social workers identified learning social work values. According to NASW, there are six core social work values that social workers should aspire to follow. These six core values include: service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity and competence (NASW, 2011). Fifteen of

the social workers identified learning about the social work core value of dignity and worth of a person. When asked what social work values were stressed in her education program, one social worker reported:

The worth of a person. Social justice and dignity but I really think the worth of a person – it means everyone has rights and entitled to being happy and healthy and everyone should have their basic needs fulfilled (SW20)

Another social worker reported:

The values of empathy and dignity and worth of a person. I use that every day to try to relate to them on a certain level. Caring, understanding, trying to find them resources (SW10)

Ten social workers reported learning the social work core value of integrity which includes the concepts of confidentiality, privacy and honesty. A social worker who works in the same community where she lives stated:

I am working in the county I grew up in so confidentiality is important. I haven't had any problems with this. My clients sometimes know me and they don't feel embarrassed asking for assistance (SW 11)

Another stressed the importance of being honest with her clients:

Honesty. Especially just getting my BSW, there are a lot of things that you pick up as you go. But, I am very comfortable just telling people, "I don't know, but I'll do my best to try to figure it out." More of a technical question but if I don't know I'm not afraid to tell them, you know. (SW3)

Also in accordance with NASW, there are six ethical standards that serve as guidelines as to what is considered ethical behavior. These ethical standards include: social workers ethical responsibilities to clients, social workers ethical responsibilities to colleagues, social workers ethical responsibilities in the practice setting, social workers ethical responsibilities as professionals, social workers ethical responsibilities to the



profession of social work and social workers ethical responsibilities to the broader society (NASW, 2011). Of these categories, all twenty social workers interviewed learned values related to the ethical standard of the social workers responsibilities to clients which include commitment to client, self-determination, informed consent, competence, and confidentiality. One social worker summed up several of these values in one statement:

Self-determination. The right to do what you want to an extent. Cultural competence is a biggie. Acceptance and dignity. Respect! You have the right to parent your children the way you want until you do something wrong. (SW19)

Another stated:

Also, helping the client – self-determination. Just helping the client to achieve it on their own – that is important because a lot of people are losing independence and if you can give it back in some small way. (SW18)

This social worker talked about the importance of teaching skills so that clients can learn to take care of themselves:

Self-determination. ...I think that's important. I'm not going to, I mean I want to help you, but I'm not going to do it for you. That's something that you need to do on your own. I get a lot of people that don't want to do the work. They just want me to do everything and I can't do that. You're not going to learn from it, you're not going to be able to take care of yourself. I can't be there every single day for you. (SW14).

The social workers all recognized values that they learned in their bachelor level social work education programs. Many discussed how these values were taught and stressed across the entire curriculum of their social work classes, not being limited to just one social work class. The social workers were able to identify values and also discuss how they apply what they learned to their current work situations.

### **Awareness of Self and Its Applicability to Social Work.**

The social workers discussed the importance of learning about themselves and gaining insight into themselves. All twenty social workers stated that they believed they became more aware of who they are as social workers and as individuals through their social work education.

One social worker reported:

That was something that we had discussions on a lot, self-awareness. You're going to work with these peoples whose values are completely different than yours; you need to know your own before you step into that situation. (SW2)

Another discussed the importance of classroom education in becoming more self-aware:

I think it just helps navigate personally why you are in the field and what it is about yourself and how it can relate to the clients you work with. (SW7)

One social worker believed that she possessed some insight into who she was, but that her classes made her even more aware:

Just becoming more aware of my surroundings and people around me. Just validated my skills that I had. I think I understood more about myself. My dad was hugely racist; my mom doesn't form an opinion – why? I think taking the social work classes opened me up and made me aware. (SW19)

The social worker all were able to identify ways in which their classes helped them to grow personally and professionally. The social workers acknowledged the need to be aware of your history, your values and your beliefs in order to help clients to your fullest potential.

## **Transfer of Knowledge**

### **Internship.**

The internship / field placement, currently referred to as the signature pedagogy of the social work profession by CSWE (CSWE, 2008), has the goal of helping students connect their learning with the field of social work. Sixteen of the social workers identified their internship as the main educational component that supported them in building further knowledge and transferring the knowledge they learned in school to their current work environment. The social workers reported this transfer of knowledge occurred due to being able to directly use the skills learned in their education to working directly with clients or in a social work office setting as a part of their field placement. The social workers were asked directly what specifically helped them to transfer their social work skills from the classroom to their current profession. Two basic comments stated by separate social workers included “I would say my internship is definitely the most helpful (SW5) and “there is so much you learn in a classroom but the internship taught me the most (SW20).

Another social worker was more descriptive in the value of her internship:

The internships, I think, are the best thing to ever make a student do. I think that's what helped me most...the internships. You're just thrown in and you're with a real social worker and they take you through the real steps...and you just learn, probably the best way, through that way. Our school required us to have two, and it's the best thing for anyone to learn...to be thrown in and learn how you are going to work in real life. (SW14)

This social worker agreed with the need to be able to practice directly applying the skills learned in his education to his internship. He stated:

Yes, my internship. I mean you can sit there and you can role play and that helped, but you were talking to the people you know. You could make a mistake and you just learn from it. But out in the field there is a little bit more pressure on you to put the knowledge that you learned in school together and to present it to a client. So, it is getting in there and learning things. (SW15)

The internship continues to be a main component of transferring the learning that occurs in the classroom to the field of social work. Social workers utilize their internships to practice and refine the social work skills they learn in the classroom to real life situations while building new knowledge at the same time.

### **Internship Supervisor.**

A key component of the success of the internship experience is the support of the internship supervisor (the person supervising them directly while at their internship). . Seventeen of the social workers identified their social work internship supervisor as the main individual who supported them in their transfer of knowledge. One social worker talked about how her supervisor revised her writing skills:

He has been working as a social worker for 20 years. He taught me so much. He was really routine and very good at what he does. The most amazing personality and showing me how to write notes – documenting, remembering to write down when you talked to someone, be really objective and sometimes there are things you don't want to write down. (SW9)

Another social worker described how she looked at her internship supervisor as essential to learning about the role of being a social worker. She stated:

She was a fabulous social worker. She was very experienced and saw how things were done. She was the go-to person for a lot of people. She was a good role model as a social worker goes. (SW11)

Lastly, this social worker discussed being challenged by her internship supervisor in order to be able to think more critically. She stated:

My field supervisor for (my agency) was very beneficial. She gave me a lot of insight. She would ask me things where I had to think. (SW16)

Social work students who are just starting in the field of social work rely on others to help them learn their roles and to give them support, especially while in their first internship.

### **Others at the Internship.**

Fourteen of the social workers also discussed the importance of other colleagues, students, or other professionals at their internship who helped them to transfer the knowledge they learned in their social work classes to their internship and ultimately to their current employment. The social workers talked about the importance of being able to reach out to others, outside of their supervisor, for support and guidance. One social worker reported:

I shadowed one worker who had previously worked for the Bureau. She had a lot of insight and how to deal with people and a lot of common sense stuff, like don't be stupid and go into a bad neighborhood by yourself, even though sometimes we have to. But, she taught me a lot of common sense stuff and a lot of how to be very brutally honest with people sometimes without being offensive. She played a big role in my education I think and that transferred on into my first job out of college. (SW1)

Another social worker talked about how a co-worker at her internship who

I had one co-worker at my internship that I was very impressed with her skills and she is now teaching. I think she was an influence on me and I didn't even realize it – I have much respect for her. (SW10)

Another social worker talked about how a woman at his internship agency showed him a new way to look at clients. He described her as:

It was a woman named Mary. It was just wonderful – positive regard – that was it right there. Her ability to work with these gentlemen who were just recently out of prison and she would greet them with open arms and just always looking for

the good and always being able to laugh and joke. That was a great, great influence. (SW17)

The social workers identified both positive and negative learning experiences due to their relationship with others at their internship. The social workers primarily talked about learning positive skills through their interaction and from the support of others at their internship. A couple of the social workers did report watching negative behavior from others at their internship, but stated that it taught them “how not to be” when they entered the field of social work.

### **Summary of Chapter Four**

This chapter answers the research question of what social work skills, knowledge and values do bachelor level social worker learn in their undergraduate education that they apply to their current jobs. This chapter provides four main themes. The first theme was inherent qualities the social workers identified that they brought into their social work education. The second theme that was presented was the processes that occurred in their undergraduate school setting that allowed them to learn information. The third theme was the direct outcomes of this learning. The fourth theme was their internship.

The first theme identified were the inherent qualities that the social workers believed they had prior to entering their education. These inherent qualities included traits such as being caring and non-judgmental, traits that they believe they built on through their education experiences.

The data gained in examining the second theme, the processes that occurred in their undergraduate education, provided secondary themes of learning from social work classes, involvement in volunteering, service groups and organizations and interactions

with their social work peers. Under the secondary theme of learning from social work classes were themes of participation in required service learning, interaction with educators and being provided with hands-on exercises.

The third theme was the direct outcome of this learning. The theme presented the results of social workers reporting learning interviewing skills, writing skills, social work core values and learning about themselves in relation to their future in social work.

The final theme was the transfer of knowledge through the social worker's experiences in their internship, with their field supervisor at their internship and through their relationship with others at their internship. The internship was a positive experience for the majority of the social workers. Between the internship experiences itself, the internship supervisor and others at the internship, many avenues of learning were provided for the social workers.

CHAPTER FIVE  
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOCIAL  
WORK EDUCATION

**Introduction**

This research is a qualitative study that focuses on the knowledge, skills, and values social workers identify learning in their undergraduate social work education that they apply to their current social work environment. This qualitative research study explored what social workers learned in their undergraduate social work education that they apply to their current work environments. The literature in regards to undergraduate social work students is sparse, yet highlights the importance of relationships in the educational process along with the importance of the internship process. The 20 participants interviewed in this study supported prior research while also highlighting new areas for study. There has been a gap in examining what bachelor level social work students are learning in their education. This research attempts to start to fill this gap. The results of this research were gathered through face to face interviews with twenty social workers who graduated from bachelor level social work programs and who are currently working in the field of social work. The results indicated that social workers believe their undergraduate education was essential to their transition to the field of social work. The social workers were able to identify key areas of learning that occurred in their education that they currently utilize in their social work occupations.



## **Discussion**

Three key areas for discussion will be explored in further detail including: the learning of social work knowledge, values, and skills through their education, the support of constructivist theory, and an analysis of the themes that developed as a result of the research.

### **Learning Social Work Knowledge, Values and Skills.**

The results of this research indicate that the social workers interviewed believed that they did learn knowledge, values, and skills in their undergraduate social work programs that have aided them in becoming more competent social workers. This information supports the mission of the Council of Social Work Education's purpose that social work education is to prepare students to be able to "demonstrate the integration and application of the competencies in practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities" (CSWE, 2008, p. 3). The results from this research support learning in regards to the core competencies as indicated essential for competent social work according to CSWE including the social workers being able to: identify themselves as professional social workers, to apply ethical standards in their work, to recognize the significance of diversity, to work towards advancing social justice, to be able to apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment and to be able to engage, assess, intervene and evaluate different levels within their social work profession (CSWE, 2008).

The social workers also affirmed the intent of the internship / field education as identified by CSWE (2008) to "connect the theoretical and conceptual contribution of the

classroom with the practical world of the practice setting” (p. 8). The social workers, in accordance with prior research, reported that their internship bridged the gap for them between their classroom education and their workplace. Through the internship, the social workers became more familiar with the culture of social work directly through being able to apply their skills to their clients and social work situations directly. Although the social workers reported being introduced to social work concepts in their classrooms, they reported their internships provided them with unscripted situations from which they were forced to use their skills directly, providing them with further awareness of the skills they did and did not possess, allowing them to ask others for support in building and to continue to grow in the use of these skills.

### **Constructivist Theory.**

The results of this research also support the application of constructivist theory to the learning process of social workers in their undergraduate educations. “Constructivist learning orientations seek to understand how pupils create their knowledge constructs and what these mean for understanding influences on thought processes” (Adams, 2006, p. 245). The social workers were able to identify specific knowledge that they gained in their undergraduate social work education that they were able to apply to their current work environment. The social workers identified social work terms or “constructs” and described how they learned these constructs through their classroom work, their interaction with peers and their interactions with their social work classmates. These concepts were viewed as building blocks from which they continually were building on

throughout their education and internship experiences and from which they continue to build on in their current employment.

Another key concept in the theory of constructivism is the concept of active learning. Marlowe & Page (1998) stated “in the constructivist classroom, a teacher does not stand and deliver most or even much of the content material. Rather, students uncover, discover, and reflect on content and their conceptions of such through inquiry, investigation, research and analysis in the context of a problem, critical question or theme” (p. 11). The social workers in this research stated the assignments or exercises that they believed were the most helpful to their education were those in which they were active participants, such as interviewing or role playing. The social workers reported actively practicing their skills and receiving feedback on their skills while in school; this allowed them to reflect and analyze their behaviors.

The research results also supports the research of Barretti (2004) who indicated that social workers identified learning not only from course content but also from what was modeled to them by their educators and their field liaisons. Neuman and Blundo (2000) describe this learning through their comments “the constructivist educator engages in a learning partnership with the student and elicits, interprets and clarifies the student’s experiences and knowledge in light of the instructor’s constructions, experiences and practice wisdoms. The instructor’s relationship with the student results in the meeting of two private versions of the world and the students’ collaboration with other students compounds this exponentially” (p. 27). The social workers provided many comments about their relationship with their educators. The social workers positive comments

related to being pushed to think differently, appreciating the feedback related to their performance in class and feeling supported by their educators.

This interaction supports the concept of the zone of proximal development in which the educator is responsible for being aware of where the student is at in their learning and guiding them in learning about new concepts and different ways of examining situations by building on the education foundation that already exists. The feedback from the social workers indicate that they believed they learned best when they were interacting directly with their educators and were provided with situations which students believed they were guided through and were given feedback about their behavior in relation to the situation. The social workers also reported negative experiences in relation to their educators not engaging in active dialogue and instead just lecturing to the students or the educator not being aware of where the student was at in their learning process and as a result spoke about concepts or terms outside of their student's zones of proximal development.

The social workers identified their learning process as being directly influenced by their interaction with their educators, internship supervisors, and their peers, both in the classroom and in the field. The social workers discussed the importance of learning from others around them and the importance of getting feedback on their behavior in order to build their social work skills. Vygotsky labeled this concept "collaboration" which Dixon-Krauss (1996) described as "social context and other human beings play a vital role in the cognitive growth of the individual" (p. 78). The belief is that through interaction and dialogue with others that we develop new thoughts and ideas (Wink &

Putney, 2002). When a social worker is attempting to learn about a concept, it is through discussing this concept with a peer, especially in a time of confusion, that the social worker gains new information for enhanced understanding.

It is important to note that for a majority of the social workers, they were also able to collaborate with others through other experiences on campus, in particular their involvement in volunteering and / or other campus organizations. Through these activities the social workers were able to actively engage in their own learning in other arenas or other socio-cultural contexts. They reported these experiences exposed them to the field of helping others and introduced them to client groups which allowed them to apply or practice the social work skills and concepts they were learning in the classroom. These experiences also made them more aware of other populations and gave them insight into themselves as possible future social workers. In addition, the social workers reported they were able to become involved in leadership roles which introduced them to other adult mentors who could guide them in different types of learning experiences from which they could build upon their skills and knowledge.

### **Analysis of Themes.**

The research also identified four main themes of learning that the social workers report they gained from their social work educational programs. These themes were inherent qualities that they brought into their education, the process of learning in their educational programs, the outcomes of this learning, and the transfer of knowledge through their involvement in their internships.

In regard to inherent qualities, the social workers all acknowledged bringing personal qualities and traits to their education which they either built upon or became more aware of. Eraut (2004) defines personal knowledge as “what individual persons bring to situations that enable them to think, interact and perform” and includes “self-knowledge, attitudes and emotions” (p. 202). The social workers, upon entering their education, reported having an awareness of themselves and their traits which they developed through their prior experiences and interactions with others before entering college. The social workers admitted to being able to label some of these traits and characteristics after being provided with a formal definition for them in their education. They also reported continuing to build on these qualities and traits throughout their education. There exists little information in the research on the personal qualities and traits that undergraduate social work students possess prior to entering their social work programs. Dettlaff, Moore & Dietz (2006) completed research on social work students in which they measured personality types of social work students utilizing the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. The results of the study indicated “social work students at one university were more likely to hold certain personality characteristics when compared to students majoring in other disciplines” (Dettlaff, Moore & Dietz, 2006, p. 16). The research completed by Dettlaff, Moore & Dietz (2006) was limited in scope as it only examined one university. However, it supports the current research that social workers identify having certain qualities and traits that they bring to their undergraduate education.

The second theme, the process of learning in their educational programs, identified three secondary themes which included learning from their social work classes,

involvement in volunteering, participating in service groups and organizations on campus, and learning from their social work peers or cohort. The results in these themes identify the importance of students taking an active role in their learning, again supporting the constructivist theory, whether it be by fulfilling service learning requirements, participating in hands-on exercises such as role playing and interviewing, becoming involved in campus activities or by sharing events and classroom experiences with their social work peers.

The social workers did identify gaining knowledge in their social work classes. The social workers reported that they learned from their involvement in service learning as part of their education, through their interactions with their educators, and through participating in hands-on exercises in the classroom. The social workers recalled examples of homework or classroom exercises that they believe were useful in their transfer of knowledge from the classroom to the workplace. The social workers described exercises in which they were actively practicing what they considered to be social work skills; for example, interviewing and participating in role plays about simulated real life social work situations. The social workers reported that through these experiences they were able to practice their skills and receive valuable feedback from classmates and their educators about these skills.

The social workers also discussed the positive impact many of their educators had on their learning. They identified positive traits of educators that enhanced their learning experience. Some of these traits were the professor being supportive, demanding critical thinking, and pushing the social worker to develop new skills.

One relationship that was not identified as having as significant of a positive impact was that of the social worker and his / her advisor. It should be noted that the lack of attention to the role of advisors among the social workers may be affected by the different structures of advising on the various campuses, the number of advisers that the social workers had as undergraduates, and the amount of time spent in the advising process. Despite this, advising is an area that needs to be examined by those in social work education. Most of the literature on advising has been focused on academic advising at the university level. Campbell and Nutt (2008) stated “academic advising plays a critical role in connecting students with learning opportunities to foster and support their engagement, success and the attainment of key learning outcomes” (NP). However, despite the significance advising is identified as having on a student, studies have shown that students are frustrated with the advising process (Spicuzza, 1992). Universities have begun to address this through a variety of measures. Swanson (2006) identified seven models which have been structured to enhance the role of academic advising. Yet, despite these models and an enhanced focus on the importance of advising, not all faculty members are aware of these models nor do they take advising seriously. Swanson (2006) reports faculty may not be motivated to enhance their advising skills due to increasing faculty workloads, lack of compensation for advising, inadequate training, legal concerns related to the formal relationship between student and advisor, and the challenges presented by students and their parents related to advising. Due to this, the role of academic advisor has not developed to the desired level, especially in the field of social work. Moore, Dietz and Wallace (2003) stated “social work has yet to emphasize



the advisor role and establish its own body of literature” (p.86). They go on to state “social work education has a mandate to provide effective advising which will enhance student experiences and protect the profession” (Moore, Dietz & Wallace, 2003, p. 93).

In addition, Wiseman and Messitt (2010) report that “faculty members also make good advisors because they are adept at creating an environment that facilitates both learning and student development in ways consistent with the goals of developmental advising as it is typically understood” (p. 36). This supports the social workers in the study who reported that their educators who also acted as advisors were a more positive influence on their eventual careers. Campbell and Nutt (2008) stated that the “inherent importance of the role and responsibilities of academic advising should be valued and supported as being integral to the teaching and learning process” (NP). The social work profession can benefit from examining and enhancing the role of advising in social work education.

The social workers identified the methods or practice classes as being the most influential classes in their education, mainly due to the fact that these classes were the classes that had them participating in learning activities in which they were more active in the learning process, such as participating in role plays or interviewing others. It is important to note that curriculum in these classes varied from school to school which made it difficult to draw conclusions or develop themes within the data; however, all of the schools were CSWE accredited which provides a degree of uniformity in terms of the curriculum.

The students also reported that they did gain knowledge that they use in their current work environment from classes outside of their social work majors. The social workers in general identified classes found in the social sciences, such as psychology and sociology. Again, these classes differed in content from university to university which made it difficult to adequately compare the classes. Also, schools varied in their requirements of whether or not students needed to declare a minor or have an emphasis in their education, which could impact the classes students are required to take to support their major.

The social workers did discuss how their completion of service learning and volunteering, whether through their social work classes or other groups on campus, aided them in learning more about the social work field. The social workers recognized the difference between service learning and volunteering; however, they reported the same positive benefits from both opportunities. These experiences assisted the social workers in learning about the day to day work involved in being a social worker to gaining knowledge about diverse client populations through hands-on involvement with different client groups. Michael E. King (2003) reviewed literature on service learning and stated “there is reason to believe that the use of service learning in social work education can greatly contribute to positive academic outcomes and to the professional development of social work students” (p. 45). Between service learning and volunteering, the social workers acknowledge they gained insight and further information about the field of social work in which they might want to work, the skills required to do that work and characteristics of the client populations in which they would work. Ozdemir, et al (2010)

completed research on the participation in activities outside of the classroom and their impact on social work students social skill levels. They found that students who engaged in other university activities aided the students in developing basic personal, social and vocational skills. They stated “the combination of classical classroom based education with approaches which incorporate activities external to the classroom can facilitate the achievement of the desired outcomes of social work education” (Ozdemir, et, al, 2010, p. 57).

The third theme identified in the research was the outcome of the social workers education or educational processes. The social workers acknowledged learning writing and interviewing skills, learning about the core values of social work, and gaining awareness about themselves and its applicability to social work.

The social workers identified that learning writing skills and learning how to interview clients were the most important skills that they learned in their undergraduate education that they use in their current employment. The social workers reported learning how to write through writing papers for their classes and practicing social work specific writing in their social work classes. The social workers reported that their educators stressed the importance of being able to write in a way specific to the field of social work. Social work students also discussed being shown social work specific forms or document in their coursework that are similar to documents they use on a daily basis, such as social histories or legal documents. They also acknowledged that their writing skills were focused on as a part of their internship.

The social workers acknowledged that they learned how to interview by directly practicing interviewing skills in their social work classes. The social workers stated they practiced interviewing role plays in classroom situations, videotaping an interview they completed with a peer, or through completing assignments in which they were required to interview a person in the community. The social workers reported that these activities allowed them to gain feedback about their skills from their social work peers and educators and that it also built their confidence in their skills.

The social workers also discussed learning core social work values in their social work classes. Hodge (2003) stated that “ideally, social work education should foster an examination of each student’s own values, the power inherent in being a professional, and how these two factors may affect client services, with special attention given to the more marginalized groups in the working class” (p. 116). Hodge’s research indicates the belief that bachelor level social workers tend to have different value frameworks than consumers of their services (Hodge, 2003). The social workers in our study did not address the value frameworks they held, however they did identify that they gained awareness of their own values and understood the importance of values and ethics in their careers, especially in regards to commitment to clients.

Social workers are expected to have self-awareness in order to competently serve their clients. Gardner (2001) reported that “implicit in the development of skills and values is a significant degree of self-awareness” (p.27) and discussed the importance of self-awareness in the field of social work. Social work educators acknowledge the need for students to develop self-awareness; however, there has been limited research in this

area. All twenty social workers in this study reported becoming more self-aware through their education, especially in regards to their own personal values and their attitudes towards others. The social workers identified that through their classroom experiences and through interactions with others they were more aware of situations in their life that have affected them (ex: parental alcohol use or past abuse), their own personal values, and how their beliefs and values can impact clients they work with. Urdang (2009) and Gardner (2001) both discuss the need for students to become self-aware in order to enhance their ability to become competent professionals in the field of social work. Social workers are identifying that they are becoming more self-aware through their education; however further research needs to be completed to identify specifically how this occurs.

The final theme was the process of the social workers transferring the knowledge gained in their classes to their current jobs as social workers. The social workers reported their internship and their ability to directly use their skills with clients, their relationship with their internship supervisor and their relationships with their colleagues at their internship as the main factors that allowed them to transfer the education they received in their undergraduate schools to their current employment.

Although the majority of research in regards to internships has been completed examining masters level internships, the results of the research supports prior research which identifies the internship as being critical in the transfer of knowledge from the classroom to the workplace (Lam, Wong & Leung, 2007; Knight, 1996; Wayne, Boge & Raskin, 2004). The social workers reported that the ability to practice their skills and to

work directly with clients along with their relationship with others in their internship assisted them in being able to implement the skills they were learning in the classroom into a social work setting. Fortune, Lee and Cavazos (2005) report “student performance in field practicum is critical because the setting and the skills directly represent the real world of practice for which the student is preparing” (p. 115). The social workers identified being able to build their skills and their confidence to enable them to be able to work in a social work setting once they graduated from college.

The social workers reported their internship supervisors were significant to their transfer of knowledge. The social workers identified their supervisors as mentors, role models, educators, and support persons. The social workers discussed learning through watching their supervisors in action, receiving feedback and support from their supervisors, and being provided direct learning experiences from their supervisors. Consistent with research completed by Knight (1996), the social workers identified their field instructor’s supervisory skills as being influential in their ability to have successful internship experiences. Social workers who believed their supervisors did not have effective skills, who did not schedule regular supervisory meetings, or who were unavailable to the social workers, reported not benefiting from their internship or reported learning “how not to be” as a social worker or a future social work supervisor.

The social workers also reported learning from others at their internship, including colleagues and peers. The social workers stated they went to others in order to shadow on the job, to get questions answered regarding their jobs or clients, to get support, or even for friendship, especially when their supervisors were not available. The

social workers turned to not only their supervisors but also their colleagues and peers to be role models. Barretti (2007) reported that in her research she found “role models provided motivation, influenced career directions, and helped students make crucial development changes while negotiating the ambiguities and tensions in their education” (p.230-231).

### **Implications and Recommendations for Social Work Education**

The education of undergraduate social work students is complex and involves intertwining experiences for students. Social work students learn in a variety of ways in their social work education, from learning from their educators and classroom experience, to learning from their peers, to being involved in experiences outside of the classroom, to learning from those involved in their internships, including colleagues and clients. All of these experiences resulted in social work students learning valuable information to aid in their skills as social workers working in the field of social work. The results, combined with other research, suggest important areas to consider when working with social work students.

It is important to identify one major limitation of this study. Due to the lack of time and resources, the results of this study are based on the social workers perceptions. Although the social workers reported learning many important social work skills in their social work education, this research did not address if these skills were identified as being proficient for the needs of their clients or agencies.

Alter and Adkins (2001) discussed concerns over the writing skills of social work students. They stated “capturing the concrete world by translating observations into

narrative is thus a critical skill for all clinicians”...“it is not overly dramatic to say that the lives of clients can be significantly diminished by social workers’ ability to write well, or significantly enhanced by strong writing proficiency in social workers” (Alter & Adkins, 2001, p.496-497). Horton & Diaz (2011) reported that social work professors may not be addressing the writing skills in their curriculum and as a result “were placed in the position of allowing someone to enter the field with inadequate communication and thinking skills or of screening out enthusiastic students who would make excellent social workers if they just had better writing and thinking skills” (p. 54). It would be essential to talk with the employers of social work students to determine if the skills the students stated they learned in their educational programs are adequate to the needs of the agency hiring. Although social workers are reporting having skills of writing and interviewing it would be beneficial to research if these skills are meeting the needs of the clients they are directly serving.

The results of this research indicate that educators are teaching students the importance of social work values and ethics. All twenty social workers unanimously discussed learning key values and ethics as outlined in the NASW code of ethics. Social work educators need to maintain their focus on values and ethics as being crucial to the role of students as they transition to professional social workers.

It is also crucial that educators involved in students social work educational experiences need to recognize the role they play in their students’ education. This research confirms the importance of constructivist theory which states that students learn directly through their interactions with others. Students turn to others to provide



modeling, support and feedback. It is important that those involved in the educational process remember that they are constantly influencing their students and those students are looking to them to model behavior and to provide direct feedback to the students regarding their skills.

In addition, little has been done in the scholarly literature in regards to social work educators and advising. Social work educators need to examine the role they want to play when advising students. Even though advising is not a role that is required in most colleges for promotion and tenure, it needs to be considered a valuable piece of the educational process if we want to assist the students in becoming competent social workers. CSWE does require that all social work programs “describe its academic and professional advising policies and procedures. Professional advising is provided by social work faculty, staff, or both” (CSWE, 2008, p. 12). However, it is clear from the results of this study, that the social workers interviewed did not feel as though advising was an important and / or consistent aspect of their learning experience. Advising can provide students with another chance at positively interacting with a social worker while also assisting the student in exploring not only their roles and expectations as students but also as future social work professionals. Social work educators are missing an opportunity for enhanced student development through not utilizing advising as an opportunity for further mentoring of their students.

The results of this research concur with other research studies which identify field education as a critical element in the transfer of education to the workplace (Sherer & Peleg-Oren, 2005; Fortune, Lee & Cavazos, 2005). In addition, it supports prior research

that indicates that field instructor availability and supervisory skills were important to developing a relationship which led to more positive field experiences (Knight, 1996). Social work education should continue to build upon the field experience as a crucial part of the social work student's education.

The results of the research are also significant to look at in comparison with the 2008 CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards. The CSWE (2008) states "the BSW curriculum prepares its graduates for generalist practice through mastery of the core competencies" (p. 3). Although the social workers all identified as least one area in each of the core competencies that they believed they learned, not all of the areas were as strongly represented as others. Of the core competencies, the results of the study indicated the social workers did report learning about how to identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly (2.1.1), apply social work ethical principles to guide practice (2.1.2), engage diversity and difference in practice (2.1.4), advocate human rights and social and economic justice (2.1.5), apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment (2.1.7), and to engage, assess, intervene, and evaluate with individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities (2.1.10) (CSWE, 2009).

Competencies that were not as strongly represented were applying critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgments (2.1.3), engage in research-informed practice and practice-informed research (2.1.6), engage in policy practice to advance social and economic well-being and to deliver effective social work services

(2.1.8), and to respond to contexts that shape practice (2.1.9) (CSWE, 2009). These areas rely on the social worker needing to make use of higher order critical thinking skills.

Educators need to ensure they are expecting students to develop and utilize these skills, not only in the classroom but in experiences outside of the classroom as well. Educators need to provide opportunities for students to engage in activities that foster the development of their skills to ensure students can engage in “research-informed practice and are proactive in responding to the impact of context on professional practice” (CSWE, 2008, p. 8). It should be the goal of all social work educators to prepare not only competent social workers, but social workers who are leaders who apply critical thinking skills in their social work practice.

Also, the social workers interviewed identified that in their current employment they are applying those social work skills they learned through more active-learning experiences. This again supports the theory of constructivist learning which states that learning should be an active process in which students learn through interactions with others. Students should be assigned activities in which they are able to practice their skills directly and which they are able to receive feedback about these skills. The social workers reported engaging in the majority of these learning experiences in their methods classes.

The majority of the social workers had difficulty identifying active learning examples from other classes, especially their research and policy classes. A few social workers discussed completing research hands-on for a community agency and several others discussed practicing policy social work through engaging with policy makers, such

as at a lobby day; however, these comments were sparse. Again this points to the importance of students having opportunities to build relationships both in and outside of the classroom. Educators need to examine if they are providing their students with hands-on, active learning experiences, especially in research and policy classes. These experiences allow students the chance to practice critical thinking skills in real-life situations while connecting them with real-life situations and individuals from which to continue to develop and build on their skills.

In addition, students should be provided with active learning experiences outside of the classroom, whether that be service learning, volunteering, or through involvement in other organizations during which they can practice their social work skills. The social workers identified these experiences as key in their development of social work skills, allowed them to collaborate with others, helped them to learn more about the role of social work, aided in increasing their self-awareness, and assisted in recognizing client populations or the social work field they would or would not like to work in.

The results of the study show that students repeatedly discussed the importance of the qualities of professors, interactions with others and the importance of fieldwork; however, they lacked in identifying any learning about theoretical content, including policy and research foundations. Only one social worker interviewed focused closely on the discussion on theoretical concepts, such as feminism or strengths based theories. Outside of this one individual, the other social workers minimally identified any theoretical concepts as being important to their current roles as social workers. One must question if students are being provided with this knowledge and are not recognizing its

significance or if the students are not being provided with this knowledge at all. The social workers all did tend to focus on skills and knowledge more related to generalist practice skills as opposed to academic learning / theoretical concepts. Sheppard, Newstead, Caccavo & Ryan (2000) describe a debate about the two cultures that exist in social work in which, “one emphasizes the prescriptions and learning from practice, with little value placed on academic learning, while the other is more concerned about questions of theory, validity and evidence” (p. 466). In education, there needs to be a place for both cultures to exist in order for students to develop necessary cognitive and critical skills to accurately appraise the situations in which they work. Students must be provided with the information necessary to appropriately examine their work situations in relation to theory. This will allow the students as social workers to integrate theory with practice in order to assist them in becoming critical thinkers, allow them to expand on their knowledge base, and assist them in responding to work situations based on informed practice and sound decision making skills. Social work educators need to explore and / or find new ways to capture student interest regarding theory and its relevance to practice.

In regards to research, the social workers also appeared to demonstrate a disconnect between completing general writing assignments and the role of research in completing these assignments. The social workers repeatedly reported that writing papers for their classes was important to their learning new concepts while also enhancing their writing skills; however, at the same time, they would report that they did not find their research class significant in their current social work roles. Educators need to examine how they are framing the concept of research and how they are engaging students in the

process of research. Students have historically viewed research negatively (Jacobson & Goheen, 2006; Maschi, Bradley, Youdin, Killian, Cleaveland & Barbera, 2007). Knapp (2006) reports “students struggle to find the link between the course material (research) and their professional aspirations” and that “faculty members who teach these courses are challenged to help their students connect with the material in a manner that is understandable, relevant, and manageable” (p. 56). Educators need to find ways to help students overcome their negative feelings about research so they can begin to understand the relevance of research to their professional careers. Engaging in students may require educators to focus on new ways of teaching research, which may include having students participate in research projects in the community. Through these activities, students learn to directly apply research to the field of social work while actively being shown the significance of research. Only through learning an appreciation for research will students ultimately be able to improve the quality of their work through their ability to explore new topics / strategies and to evaluate their practice in order to improve what they are doing on a day to day basis.

The social workers also identified varied qualities and traits that they bring to their social work programs. The social workers discussed prior life experiences that impact these qualities and traits. It is important for educators to learn more about prior life experiences that shape qualities and traits in order to provide the necessary education to appropriately support or challenge the students. It is important that educators are aware of what students are bringing to the classroom in order to ensure students are able to fully develop self-awareness and to build a professional self. Undang (2009) argues that

educators have “abandoned” the focus on self-reflection and self-awareness and that “students need educational support and direction to deepen their capacity to develop a professional self, including an ability to recognize, understand, and utilize their feelings and insights on behalf of their clients” (p. 532). Self-awareness is an important part of a social work student’s educational experience. Social work educators need to continue to research the impact of inherent traits and skills and their impact on student learning.

Lastly, the social workers reported learning not only from their social work classes but also from classes outside of the social work major. The social workers reported learning content in other classes that impact what they do on a daily basis as a social worker. Although all of the social workers came from schools accredited by the Council of Social Work Education, not all students obtained the same educational content. Several of the social workers reported not learning enough about mental illness or alcohol and drug content, while others reported learning about these issues through classes outside of the major of social work. It is important for social work educators to discover what students are being taught in their non-social work classes that they find important to their professional careers in order to continue to build on that knowledge and to strengthen the skills of students.

This research does confirm that students are learning knowledge, values and skills which are essential to their current roles as practicing social workers. It also confirms that social workers are learning the importance of values and ethics. It also highlights the importance of the relationships between students and others involved in their education,

including professors, other students, field supervisors, and colleagues at their field agencies.

Despite this, the results of this study indicate that there is a need for many areas of future research in the field of social work, especially pertaining to undergraduate social work education. Educators need to examine their role in their student's education and must make a commitment to learning how to provide learning experiences which will enhance student learning.

One area in which social work educators need to improve and which deserves future research is the area of academic advising. In this role, social work educators are provided with the opportunity to assist students in shaping their educational experiences and to learn more about student learning. Educators need to embrace advising as a time to not only mentor students but to have active discussions with students about what is working and not working in their education in order to enhance our educational programs.

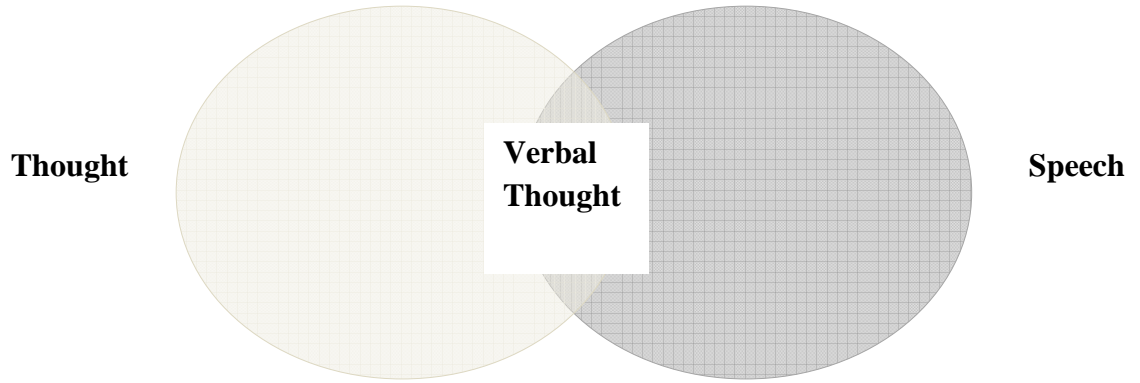
In addition, social work educators need to have active discussions and complete further research on the impact of classes outside of the social work programs on student learning. Through this, educators would be able to better connect students with classes which will further enhance their social work skills. This may involve talking with other professors outside of the social work departments in order to develop collaborative learning experiences and linkages for our students which will enhance their learning and critical thinking skills.



Lastly, educators must make a commitment to focusing on student's critical thinking skills. Educators must be willing to examine what critical thinking skills they are providing to their students. Educators must also be having discussions with students about their critical thinking skills and must explore ways to demonstrate the connection between skill and theory.

Although this research does demonstrate that social work students have acquired education that is valuable to them as social workers, social work educators must be committed to not accepting the outcome of producing "competent" social workers, but must find ways to help social work students excel in their learning opportunities. The more that we can learn from this and subsequent studies will help us push our students to go above and beyond, the better will be the future of social work and social work education.

APPENDIX A:  
VYGOTZKY VENN DIAGRAM



APPENDIX B:  
DEMOGRAPHIC DATA COLLECTION SHEET

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Gender \_\_\_\_\_

Race \_\_\_\_\_

Undergraduate Social Work Program Attended \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Graduation \_\_\_\_\_

Current Employment \_\_\_\_\_

Field of Social Work Employment \_\_\_\_\_

Date Started at Current Employment \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX C:  
PARTICIPANT CONSENT

## CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEW

**Project Title:** From classroom to the workplace: becoming a social worker

**Researcher(s):** Sarah Sheridan

**Faculty Sponsor:** Dr. Ed Gumz

### **Introduction:**

You are being asked to take part in a research study being conducted by Sarah Sheridan for her dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Edward Gumz in the Department of Social Work at Loyola University of Chicago.

You are being asked to participate because you are a graduate of a bachelor level social work program and are currently working in the field of social work. There will be twenty participants for this study. General exclusion criteria include non-traditional students, any students who have attended the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater who had Sarah Sheridan as a teacher, and any students from Loyola University.

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before deciding whether to participate in the study.

### **Purpose:**

The purpose of this study is for social workers to share, in their own words, how their social work education has impacted their current ability to work as a social worker.

### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in a one-on- one interview about your educational experiences related to social work. The interview will be approximately one to two hours, conducted at a place convenient to you and will be audio-taped to ensure accuracy of information obtained.

### **Risks/Benefits:**

There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life.

There are no direct benefits to you from participation, but this research could be beneficial to the field of social work education and future social work students.

**Confidentiality:**

- Your participation in this research will be confidential. You will be assigned a participant identification number by the researcher. Only the researcher will have the information matching your identification number to you name. This information will be kept in a locked cabinet for ten years after which time it will be destroyed.
- The interview will be transcribed. The transcription will not contain any identifiable information, including your name.
- The interview will be audio-taped. The researcher will be the only person with access to this audio-tape. The audio-tape will be stored in a locked cabinet and will be kept for ten years after which time it will be destroyed.

**Voluntary Participation:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Even if you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.

**Contacts and Questions:**

If you have questions about this research study, please feel free to contact Sarah Sheridan at [sheridas@uww.edu](mailto:sheridas@uww.edu) or 608-751-9004 or Dr. Edward Gumz at 312-915-7015.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Compliance Manager in Loyola's Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689.

**Statement of Consent:**

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understood the information provided above, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this research study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

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**Participant's Signature**

**Date**

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**Researcher's Signature**

**Date**



APPENDIX D:  
ONE ON ONE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

What knowledge did you gain in your social work education that you apply in your current employment?

- In which specific social work classes (core and elective) did you gain this knowledge?
- Are there specific examples / exercises / homework from your classes that you apply to daily social work jobs?
- What social work knowledge/ skills are important in your current social work employment?
- Are there classes you believe you should have had, but did not? What topic or skills do you wish you would have learned or learned more of?
- Are there social work classes that you believe were not helpful to your current social work position?

What social work values were stressed in your social work education?

- In what specific classes (core and electives) were values stressed?
- How important are values in your current social work employment?

What practical skills do you utilize as a social worker in your current social work employment?

- Did any of your social work classes teach you these practical skills? If so, which classes?

Is there anything specific that has supported the transfer of your knowledge, values and skills learned in school to your direct social work practice (people, activities, internship, etc)?

Do you feel you have any personal qualities that aid in your ability to be a social worker?

Did any of your social work educational experiences build on these personal qualities?

Did you have any experiences in your education outside of the classroom that enhanced your social work skills? If so, please describe.

- Did your social work classes help you grow personally?

Did you complete any service learning in your education? If yes, how did that influence your social work educational experience? Does it have any impact on your current work?

Describe any relationships with educators / others involved in your education that impact your current abilities as a social worker.

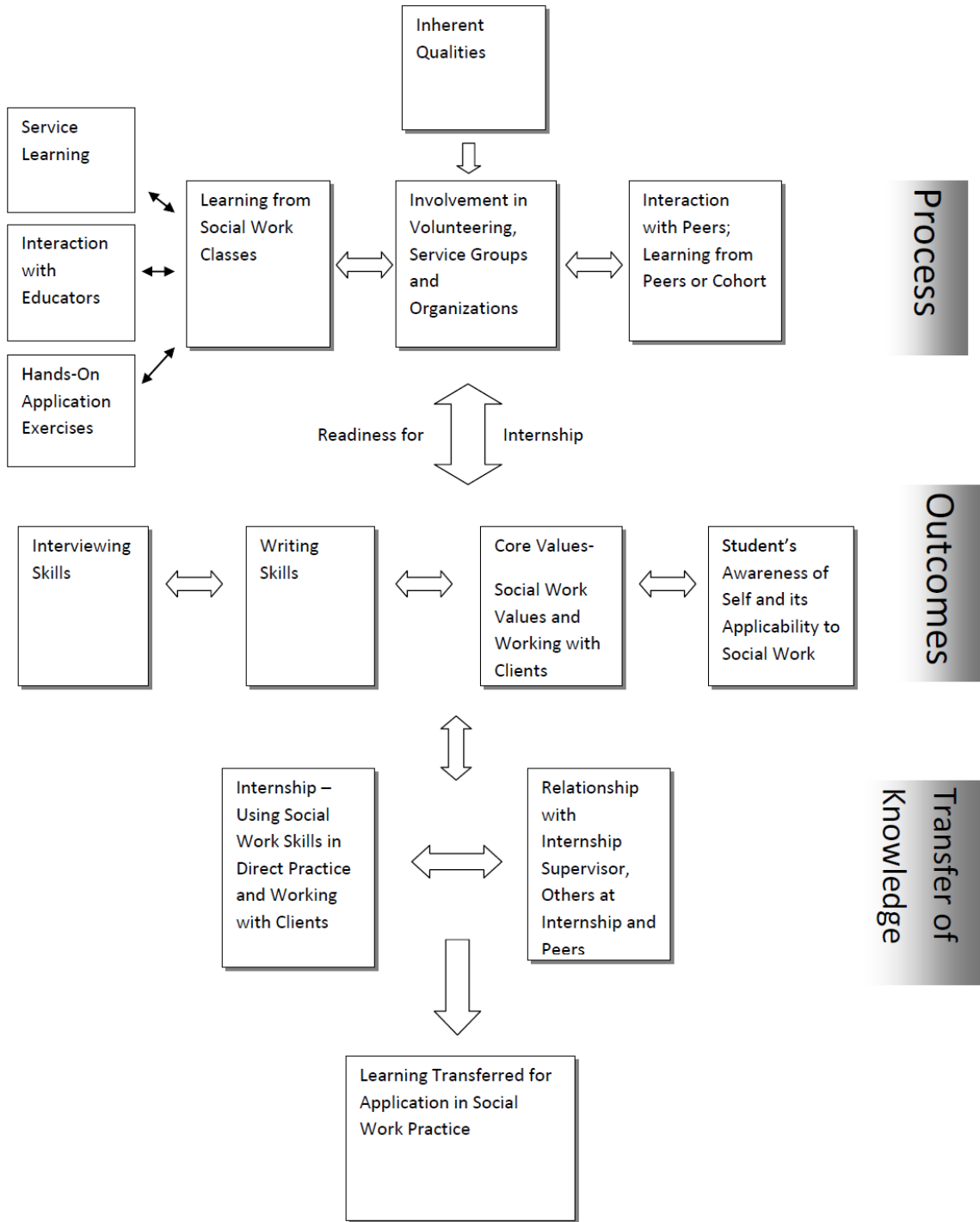
- Did your advisor have any impact on your current social work skills?
- Did your field placement supervisor have any impact on your current social work skills?

Did your classes in your minor support your social work skills? If yes, what classes?

Do you lead any groups?

- If so, what type of group skills do you utilize?
- Where did you learn your group skills

APPENDIX E:  
DIAGRAM OF THEMES



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