

# “A REALLY IMPORTANT ROLE”: USING A PARTICIPANT-VOICED POEM TO EXPLORE STUDENTS’ EXPRESSION OF SOCIAL WORK’S PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper takes a creative writing approach (Phillips & Kara, 2021) to focus on a secondary issue arising out of research conducted in 2019. The research used focus groups to explore the experiences of social work students in fieldwork placements, within an interdisciplinary team (Austin & Pentecost, 2020). The secondary issue discussed here relates specifically to how the observation of social work practice in the ‘real world’ interacts with and affects the students’ emerging sense of professional identity. The focus group conversations in the initial research demonstrated that the students displayed a mixture of idealism and pragmatism. They had observed and participated in a range of team settings in which social workers played a role, and they reported that the roles both assigned to and claimed by social workers varied across the teams. Some students had been placed with high-functioning interdisciplinary teams where they felt the contribution of social work was both understood and valued. Some of the students were somewhat disillusioned with what they had experienced, especially when the roles they saw available for social workers to occupy seemed at odds with what they had been taught.

A number of them were eloquent and articulate in communicating their understanding of the role, work and ethical orientation of social work. Lecturers in the School of Education and Social Sciences at the Eastern Institute of Technology (EIT) involved in teacher and social work education have long grappled with the probability that students in work placements will observe some less than optimal practice, and have worked hard to mitigate this. That students are also observing the ways others see and treat members of their future profession is inevitable in practicum placements. The paper outlines how re-analysing the original data with a different lens and methodology created new insights about the students’ processing of their experience.

## CONTEXT

Initial undergraduate education provides an induction into a profession’s values and to the work of that profession. Classroom-based and workplace-based learning provide two sites for the development of professional identity. Liddell et al. found that while skills development and theory was more likely to be attributed to classroom learning, practicum was vital in “helping participants understand the institutional culture and political landscape of a workplace” (2014, p.78).

Students’ pre-practicum positive enthusiasm about their future role is not always balanced with an understanding of the complex realities of the workplace (Beltman et al., 2015). Social workers who supervise students in workplace practicums are likely to view the real world setting as the site where students “actually acquire their identity as social workers” (Shands-Baab, 2008, p.154). This view is endorsed by students (Shands-Baab, 2008).

In writing about student teachers in practice-based education, Trede and McEwen (2012) argue that “identity is knowing what one stands for” (p.30) and suggest that practicum placements provide a crucial opportunity for students to develop a critical professional identity. Placements are a site for them to try out their “possible or imagined future professional identities” (Haines, 2015, p.30), based on their developing understanding of the work of their profession.

The EIT social work programme is imbued with the two foci for social work practice, as defined by the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW). These are:

- (i) To enable and empower individuals, families, groups and communities to find their own solutions to the issues and problems they face;
- (ii) To inform society at large about the injustices in its midst, and to engage in action to change the structures of society that create and perpetuate injustice (ANZASW, 2019, p.7).

They further assert that practice that has only the first focus may lead to imposing solutions on others, if it does not seek to identify and address injustice.

It had been an uncomfortable experience for the focus group facilitator in the original research project to hear words like “minimised” and “diminished” in some of the students’ descriptions of the ways they saw social work and social workers positioned during their placements. In some cases, the opportunities they were seeing for social work practice seemed constrained and limited, and not fulfilling both foci of finding solutions and acting for social justice. We wondered what a revisiting the interview data might tell us about how someone on the cusp of entering a profession makes sense of what they see and fits it into their conceptualising of what it is to be a member of that profession.

## METHOD

The data re-analysed for this article was collected during 2019 for the project investigating how social work students on placement experienced the positioning of social workers within a district health board setting (Austin & Pentecost, 2020). The research was approved by EIT’s Research Ethics Approvals Committee (reference 19/30), and supported by an EIT internal research grant. It involved focus group interviews with third- and fourth-year social work students who had been on a sixty-day practicum in a District Health Board. All such students were invited to take part in the research by a person who did not teach on their programme. Of eight invited, a total of six students participated in the focus groups. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed to investigate the initial research question. Four main themes emerged: organisational and systems pressures; the different operations of multi- and inter-disciplinary teams; the positioning of social work within the medical model; and the importance of the social worker’s articulation of their role. From these, we drew implications for social work education (Austin & Pentecost, 2020).

We decided to re-engage with the data to explore a new focus of developing professional identity. Using a poetic approach to the recorded conversations, one researcher drew out phrases and sentences to produce a “participant voiced” poem (Phillips & Kara, 2021, p.127). Some of the phrases and sentences students said were re-arranged to produce an evocative composite account of the ways they talked about their experience and the impacts it had on their ideas about social work practice. This produces a found poem, one that is composed using the exact words participants said, but chosen and arranged by the researcher (Patrick, 2016; Richardson, 2000). Within the practice of narrative therapy, such poetic re-presentation of spoken words is known as a “rescued speech poem” (Behan, 2003), and the practice has migrated from therapy to research (Pentecost, 2006; Speedy, 2008).

The interview transcripts were re-read many times, taking excerpts that Bird (2000) calls “talk that sings” and ultimately rearranging them, with no additional words, into a stanza form. The resulting poem produced a reading of the conversations which captured one researcher’s sense of what the participants said about the professional activities and identity of social workers, the profession, and their own growing allegiance with its ethos. Successive drafts of the poem were reviewed by the second researcher, whose suggestions were incorporated into further iterations of the poem. One email had the subject line “Poem version 77”, only slightly exaggerating the amount of playing about with word choice, placement, order and line length involved.

Presenting the words in a poetic rather than prose format makes the shaping hand of the researcher apparent: this is a re-presentation of the research data, obviously filtered for meaning by the researcher (Richardson, 2000). It is argued that poetic presentation of data allows for a more open-ended interpretation and re-presentation of what was said (Behan, 2003), and that new insights into the data become possible through the process of presenting prose in a poetic format (Richardson, 2000). The production of a poem from the students’ words opened a different window on the data and the students’ experience for us as researchers. As Patrick (2016) and Richardson (2000) assert, poetic presentation both invites a different emotional response to material presented in prose, and allows us to see things anew. Our understanding of the student’s feelings of disheartenment and diminishment was shifted in the process of carefully shaping some of their words into this format.

The findings are produced below as a poetic document, and aspects of the poem (in italics) are then linked in the Discussion section to the ANZASW Code of Ethics (2019) and to literature about professional identity and the social work role.

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### **I’m going to do that one day.**

Social workers are quite good at creating  
a picture that takes into account  
a lot of different things in a person’s life:  
the environment, history and upbringing, financial stuff.  
All the different things that make up how someone might be in that situation now.  
That’s just because we have a different lens that we come from,  
using things like the family system theory, and the ecological system theory.  
All that kind of stuff gives us  
a slightly different perspective to bring to the table, and  
highlight different things.

We look at it from a wider view,  
take in the whole context of  
everything.  
Don’t see just the person and them being sick –  
see their context, their family, and what’s going on,  
why they can’t get to treatment,  
why they’ve fallen through the gaps,  
why they’re not engaging.  
How to then get them engaged.

A definite big advocate role for the social worker.  
How resourceful this particular social worker was, within her mahi,  
and how fast it was and  
important to those people.  
It was their choice,  
respecting people's choice, and their own self-determination  
in what they want to do.

It's hard road for a social worker to gain respect...  
Especially in the medical model I'm saying,  
because in the hospital I saw it was just like a big machine,  
and the social workers were more or less greasing the box.  
I witnessed social work being minimised quite a lot  
It gets diminished in other teams. It gets,  
"Well, you're just there for  
housing,  
you're there for  
finance."  
You'll then make phone calls – basically you're the  
receptionist.

When you see the social workers that you're working with  
doing such an amazing job with people,  
to then see in the next breath  
someone diminish that work that they're doing,  
to a chat

it's quite disheartening.  
Yeah, have a chat, and that kind of thing.  
You'd have quite a good chat!

We're just in study for four years to have a chat?

When it worked really well it was a really important role.  
Things like the doctors understood that  
the social worker will ensure that person attends the appointments,  
and is living well enough that they can maintain the treatment plan.  
They don't just see us as "just the social worker".  
They see us as important people  
in the roles that we play in their clients' lives,  
and lives of people we see.

That was just really cool to see.  
I'm like, 'I'm going to do that one day'.

## DISCUSSION

The students' words embodied "the dual focus" (ANZASW, 2019, p.7) of social work, empowerment of clients and addressing injustice. In line with the Code of Ethics (ANZASW, 2019), the students know that social work is about "respecting people's choice, and their own self-determination in what they want to do." And they also acknowledge that social work is concerned with systemic inequalities: that social workers "Don't see just the person and them being sick – see their context, their family, and what's going on, why they can't get to treatment, why they've fallen through the gaps, why they're not engaging."

Beddoe (2013, p.24) noted that social workers in a health setting "often argue that they must be professionally assertive in order to keep their values afloat in a stormy sea of change." The student participants in this project certainly observed that the ways social work role was carried out and given space varied in its allegiance to the social justice aspects of the profession. The position accorded social work ranged from high respect for the social worker's opinions and networking and advocacy skills ("Things like the doctors understood that the social worker will ensure that person attends the appointments, and is living well enough that they can maintain the treatment plan"), to expecting them to perform only administrative, and referral-related tasks ("Well, you're just there for housing, you're there for finance." "You'll then make phone calls - basically you're the receptionist"). The literature on the role of social work within interdisciplinary teams certainly supports this variation in the space available for performing the dual foci of the profession (Zerden et al., 2019; Ashcroft et al., 2018; Peterson et al., 2018). Peterson et al. (2018, p.688) found, for example, that "other members of the multidisciplinary teams viewed the roles of social workers to be focused on being a conduit and coordinator".

It would seem that distinguishing the social work role as "diminished... to a chat" or to "receptionist" was possible for the students because of their clear grasp of the profession's claimed identity and functions, thereby enabling them to judge when it is not afforded space to carry out its vision. Liddell et al.'s (2014) finding that experiencing institutional politics is more influential than talking about them seems to be borne out by these students' observations about the way the hospital system functioned ("a big machine"), and the distinctions they drew between teams where social workers made a holistic contribution and those where they performed more constrained administrative roles. They could identify the "really important role" that "creat(es) a picture that takes into account a lot of things in a person's life."

## CONCLUSION

The words we have captured in this poem demonstrate that these students have what Trede and McEwen (2012, p.29) characterise as the ability to "think for themselves, question and engage in dialogue so that they can claim control of their professional journey." That the participants were able to articulate a clear vision of social work "when it worked really well" implies that they may carry into multi- or inter-disciplinary teams the necessary assertion to create conditions for social work's unique contribution to a team to be valued (Beddoe, 2013). They understand and value what the "different lens that we come from" can contribute to a healthcare team. They appreciate that the work of their profession must be based in theory (ANZASW, 2019), for example, "using things like the family system theory, and the ecological system theory". They value their education, and do not want to see social work's unique contribution constrained or diminished: "We're just in study for four years to have a chat?" Despite the "disheartening" effects of seeing "social work being minimised quite a lot", their intention is to step fully into the profession's dual focus. They aim to emulate the practice of those they observed doing so: "That was just really cool to see. I'm like, 'I'm going to do that one day!'"

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