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'Perhaps I should be working with potted plants or standing at the fish counter instead?': newly educated social workers' reflections on their first years in practice

Jag kanske skulle arbeta med krukväxter eller stå i fiskdisken istället?: Nyexaminerade socionomers reflektioner över deras första år i yrket

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ABSTRACT

The present research follows twelve Swedish social work graduates over their first years in practice. The overall aim of the study was to gain insight into the journey from their social work education into the profession. This paper presents the findings of the third series of interviews after 20 months in practice and focuses on how the new practitioners reflected on their professional role and the demands of the work. Those working in statutory social services expressed dissatisfaction with the organisational culture and work practices. They cited budget cuts, the climate of managerialism and not enough time for meeting with clients. These practitioners also reflected that their social work education had not prepared them for the complex realities of practice. Changes in the professional role of social workers within the contemporary organisational and broader policy context in Sweden and the importance of supporting the development of professional expertise in the social work journey are discussed.

ABSTRAKT

I denna studie följs tolv nyexaminerade socionomer under deras första år i yrket. Det övergripande syftet var att få en inblick i hur övergången från socionomutbildningen till yrkeslivet och de första åren i yrket kan upplevas. I föreliggande artikel presenteras resultaten av den tredje intervjuomgången som ägde rum efter ca 20 månader i yrkeslivet där de nyexaminerade socionomerna reflekterade kring arbetets innehåll och yrkesrollen i relation till de förväntningar de hade, samt hur de upplevde att de kunskaper och färdigheter de hade med sig från utbildningen svarade mot de krav som ställdes på dem i yrkeslivet. Bland de som arbetade som socialsekreterare var ett genomgående tema i intervjuerna missnöje med arbetets innehåll och med organisationskulturen där fokus på budget och besparingar och för lite tid till direktkontakter med klienter beskrevs överlag. Dessa socionomer upplevde inte att socionomutbildningen förberett dem tillräckligt väl för den komplexa

KEYWORDS

Newly educated social workers; professional role; practice; new public management

NYCKELORD

Nyexaminerade socionomer; professionell roll; praktik; New Public Management

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verklighet de mötte i arbetslivet. Medan många beskrev att de nu lärt sig samtalsteknik och att behärska krävande möten med klienter så beskrev dessa arbetsuppgifter vara svåra att klara av som nyexaminerad socionom. Förändringar i socialarbetarrollen och vikten av överbygga klyftan mellan utbildning och praktik diskuteras.

Introduction

The challenges of translating social work values and social justice ideals into reality within contemporary practice environments have received attention in the international literature (Grant et al., 2017; Lynch & Forde, 2016; Tham & Lynch, 2014, 2019). Neoliberal influences that have led to increasingly restrictive practice environments characterised by bureaucracy and control which has eroded the professional autonomy of social workers (Jönsson, 2019; Lauri, 2019; Rogowski, 2010; Shanks et al., 2015). This has shifted the focus away from relationship-based practices in child and family social work (Munro, 2011; Tham, 2018). This development raises questions about how new graduates negotiate the transition from university to the workplace and highlights the role of employing organisations in facilitating this transition through workplace induction processes. While longitudinal studies that follow graduating students from university into the workplace and over the first years in practice still are scarce, these designs are necessary to explore the experiences of new practitioners as they acquire and develop their skills to respond to 'real-world unstructured' problems (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986, p. 20). This lack of research was the starting point for the present study.

The present study follows twelve Swedish social work graduates from University and over their first years in practice. The overall aim of the study was to gain insight in the process of transition from their social work education to working in the profession and across the first years in practice. The interviews took place just before graduating, after four months, and again after twenty months in practice. This paper presents and discusses the results of the third interview. In this third phase, the research questions concerned how these new practitioners reflected on: (a) the nature of the work and professional social work role in relation to their expectations, (b) their knowledge and skills in relation to what they were expected to manage in their professional role, (c) their own development in the professional role, and (d) their plans for the future.

Research context

Tertiary social work education in Sweden can be described as generic and aims to prepare social workers for positions in the broad field of social work. The majority of Swedish social workers have completed a Bachelor of Science in Social Work which requires 3.5 years of study. Over the last decades, the academic skills and knowledge of science and research has been emphasised in Sweden, as in the other Nordic countries (Juliusdottir & Petersson, 2004; Sandström, 2007). For example, students undertake only one field placement (around 75 days) in most social work programmes. They are placed in a wide range of settings such as social services, non-government organisations, hospitals and schools as well as out-of-home care institutions and treatment centres. Relevant to the current research is the organisational context of social work.

In Sweden, as in many other Western countries, the delivery of statutory social services has undergone major organisational changes in recent decades. In this regard, New Public Management (NPM) has influenced social work organisations to varying degrees (Bejerot et al., 2017; Hartman, 2011; Höjer & Forkby, 2011; Meagher & Szebehely, 2013; Meagher et al., 2015; Shanks et al., 2015). A key tool in the NPM logic is to standardise work in order to assure quality and reduce costs which has also led to increased bureaucracy and the decentralisation of profit and cost responsibility and increased budget control requirements (Almqvist, 2006; Hood, 1991, 1995; Målvist et al., 2011). A deterioration of working conditions due to restrictive budgets and reduced autonomy is described as a consequence

for professionals working in these organisations (Bejerot et al., 2017). This provides the context for the present research as most of the participants in this study were working in social services or in other public organisations. Following social work graduates into these workplaces provides insights into their experiences and encounters as practitioners within contemporary social work organisational contexts.

Conceptual framework

From novice to experienced practitioner

Thirty years ago, Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) proposed that new graduates are engaged in a dynamic developmental process which enables them to progress from novice practitioner to experienced professional (i.e. expert practitioner). Their framework captures the transitions that new graduates may experience over the first few years in practice as they gain experience and 'know-how' which builds on earlier 'rule-based' knowledge (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986). Novice practitioners are described as more likely to follow guidelines and rules unreflectively while more experienced social workers are more critically reflective (Fook et al., 2000, p. 189). The 'Novice' (Stage 1) learns and follows rules but does not have a broad overview of the task, thus the focus is on how well rules are applied. Following experience, the 'Advanced Beginner' (Stage 2) improves and develops as 'situational' elements are recognised as meaningful and incorporated into the performance. Here, experience is more relevant than verbal task descriptions. 'Competence' (Stage 3) is the stage where goals are selected and prioritised and the consequences of decisions matter. The two highest levels of skill are 'Proficiency' (Stage 4) and 'Expertise' (Stage 5), the former denoting intuitive organising and understanding the task combined with analytic thinking about the course of action and the latter, skilled behaviour based on accumulation of experiences and 'intuitive' recognition of new situations. Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) offer an analysis of process as practitioners move between and across phases rather than simply a linear model of progression. As the present study focuses on 'transitions' from education to practice and follows the participants over the first few years, it provides an appropriate lens to explore these processes of skills development.

Critical incidents

This research technique has been used for studying the specific work of practitioners grounded in context (Benner, 1984; Fook et al., 2000). Interviewees are asked to describe incidents which they experienced as problematic or which they handled well. This technique was used in the current research to facilitate reflection on experience.

Method

Sampling and recruitment

Initially, thirteen of 26 social work students graduating from the same university in Sweden volunteered to participate in the research following a class presentation detailing the research aims and objectives. Ten of the participants were women; eleven were between the ages of 25 and 35 years, and the other two were just above 40 years old. Two of them undertook field practice in the same workplace where they began working directly after graduating but no one had previous experience of social work. As one of the participants cancelled the second interview, twelve participants were included in the following interviews.

Although the researcher was a university teacher, she had no prior contact with most of the students who volunteered to participate. It was clarified that the study was not part of the University's evaluation of their education but part of a research project funded by the Swedish Research Council

for Health, Working Life and Welfare (FAS/FORTE). The study followed ethical guidelines and national laws (SFS, 2003). Informed consent was obtained from the participants who were informed of their right to withdraw at any time in the research process. They were assured of anonymity in the presentation of study findings.

The interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the study participants (see Tham & Lynch, 2014 and 2017 for details on the first and second phase). In this third phase, the interviews lasted between 50 and 80 min. As previously, the interviews took place at a place chosen by the participant; most often at their workplace or in a café. The interviews were transcribed and the data were manually analysed. The critical incidents technique was used (see Fook et al., 2000). A thematic analysis was conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and data were coded into three broad themes: the nature of the work and professional social work role; perceived competency in the professional role; and the acquisition and development of practice skills. Relationships within and between the above themes were identified, thereby enabling further refinement and identification of emerging themes using an inductive and iterative process, drawing on the ideas of Charmaz and Henwood (2008). This inductive approach suited the aims of the study as it enabled the meaningful analysis of qualitative data from the open-ended interviews.

Results

Where were they working?

Some changes had occurred since the previous interview (Table 1). At the current interview (approximately 20 months in the workplace), two of the new practitioners had left their positions in the statutory social services, and five of the seven who at the time of the previous interview were working in social services remained at their workplaces. The eighth participant who was working in social services at the time of the previous interview was not possible to reach this time. The five who still worked in social services, were processing applications of social assistance or undertaking casework. Of the two who had left social services, one was working in a women's shelter and the other in a residence for refugee children and youth. The participant who had been employed at a research centre was now in child protection. The other three were still in their previous positions, that is, in a day care centre for youth, in a home for the elderly and the third one in the same position that she held prior to her social work education, which was not connected to social work.

Table 1. Workplaces at Interview 2 and Interview 3.

| Student | Interview 2 Workplace after 4 months | Interview 3 Workplace after 20 months |
|---------|---|--|
| A | Social services (income support) | Social services (income support but new workplace) |
| B | Social services (income support) | Social services (same workplace) |
| C | Social services (income support) | Women's shelter |
| D | Social services (income support) | Refugee residence |
| E | Social services (child welfare) | – |
| F | Social services (adults) | Social services (same workplace) |
| G | Social services (adults/drug addiction) | Social services (same workplace) |
| H | Continued studying (not social work) | Refugee residence |
| I | Social services (adults) | Social services (Unaccompanied minors) |
| J | Research Centre | Social services (Child Welfare) |
| K | Day care for young people | Day care for young people (same workplace) |
| L | Manager in elderly care | Manager in elderly care (same workplace) |
| M | Not in social work | Not in social work |

Theme 1. The nature of the work and professional social work role

Employee turnover and stress in statutory social services

In the interviews with the social workers employed in social services, the strong themes of high workload and time pressure emerged. Several described their workplaces as chaotic with high staff turnover, vacancies and the employment of mainly newly educated social workers. These themes resonated with the international research literature, including Sweden where high work demands, high turnover of workers and recruitment difficulties have been described since 2003 (Tham, 2007a, 2007b, 2018; Tham & Meagher, 2009).

Some of these new practitioners were unsure of how many social workers were in their work group due to constant vacancies and contract staff from recruitment companies who were working with cases but not paid to participate in staff meetings or supervision:

We are between 13 and 15 social workers in my group, two have been working here longer than I have, and I have worked here for 1½ years – and it seems to be the same situation in the other groups here at the agency. (Social worker A)

I think that over half of those who worked here when I began working here (6 months ago) – of the 19 or how many we should be in this section – joined later than me. In my group, it is just one girl who has been here longer than me. (Social worker J)

One of the new practitioners who was previously in social services had left her employment without having a new place of work. She described the reason for this as stress and the harsh organisational climate:

It was stressful and quite tough, people were standing at the front desk and knocked on the window and had no food for the day. You had to jump in and handle other colleagues' cases. So, the work was quite fragmented. If you compare that with how the situation is for me here at this workplace (works now in a home for young refugees) it's an extreme difference! (Social worker D)

The feeling of not doing a 'good enough' job and their awareness that they could do so much more if they only had the time was a recurring theme among these social workers:

You could do so much more in each case - I can see what could be done ... but you must choose some clients to whom you give priority. If you do that you notice a difference in their situation! (Social worker A)

There once was a client who told me that if you are just checking that I have all the certificates and papers needed to apply (for social assistance), a computer might as well do your job! (Social worker F)

In contrast to the image conveyed by the social workers in statutory social service work, those who worked in the refugee home or in the women's shelter described a quieter pace of work;

I do not have 70 clients, I have time to do a good job! (Social worker D)

The social worker employed in a women's shelter said:

It is not particularly stressful here, it may sound so because we work with clients who are quite anxious and stressed, but it is a fairly slow-paced place of work. (Social worker C)

Not only the pace differed in these stories. The descriptions of job satisfaction differed, where those working outside social services frequently described satisfaction with their work such as positive feedback from clients which was not apparent in the others' stories.

The 'tyranny' of the budget

Disappointment about how poorly the organisation functioned was often expressed by the social workers in social services. In addition to descriptions of high staff turnover and stress, a common point expressed was that adhering to the budget was seen as more important than meeting clients' needs:

The hardest thing is to constantly work at the minimum level. To know how things *should be done*, but not being able to do them that way ... but the politicians are the ones who set the budget and this I cannot influence. (Social worker F)

The social workers expressed that proposed actions that they considered important for the clients were often rejected by their supervisors:

You get so tired of having to fight against the organisation to get approvals for things that the clients need. You must trick the system if you want to get approvals. (Social worker J)

One of the social workers expressed that if she wanted her supervisor to approve a decision for client assistance, she had learned not to request this herself because her supervisor then almost always would say no. The best strategy was to describe the situation in a way that led the supervisor to come to this decision:

I have to get her (the supervisor) to come to this decision by describing the conditions which I know she wants. (Social worker J)

She expressed considerable disappointment over how the organisation functioned:

The safety net in our society should not function like this! You have to become a bureaucrat to survive in this situation. You have to hide behind the guidelines and do as little as possible. I do not think anyone wants such social workers! (Social worker J)

That neoliberal influences may hamper social workers' capacity to prioritise their client's rights and undertake the work that they were educated to do is also reflected in other studies with Swedish social workers (Jönsson, 2019; Lauri, 2019).

Top-down' organisations

In several interviews social service organisations were described as 'top-down' controlled organisations where people who were regarded as too outspoken were dismissed:

We had a very supportive manager who was fired. She talked too much. (Social worker F)

Another of those employed in social services articulated the lack of professional autonomy that is, as the opportunity to practice core social work skills such as critical thinking, professional judgement and decision-making in the best interests of clients:

It surprised me that people were not encouraged to question and have ideas about things. Very much is decided from the top. (Social worker G)

Some of the social workers who had been employed for more than 20 months in social services were beginning to find strategies to manage the situation. One strategy was to limit the amount of time invested in their working life, for example not working overtime or engaging in union activities. Another strategy was to stay at the office in the evening, which made it possible to work more effectively than during daytime. These overtime hours could then be used for taking a day off later. A third strategy was to be accessible for the clients also outside of telephone contact hours which led to more job satisfaction. This social worker said that even if she only had time to talk for a minute when clients called this was very much appreciated by them and this availability led to a calmer working atmosphere.

It was evident that many social workers now had passed the first novice phase according to Dreyfus and Dreyfus' framework (1986) and were no longer occupied by following the rules and regulations and fear of making mistakes (Fook et al., 2000). Now they could see the contexts and structures (Advanced beginner – stage 2) and the descriptions of difficulties were often the limits and restrictions that these regulations created (Competency – stage 3). These were indications that several of them were moving from advanced beginner to the competency stage.

Theme 2. Perceived competence in professional role

To explore how these social workers reflected on their own competence in relation to the demands of their professional roles, they were asked to describe critical incidents in their work with clients: (a) situations they had experienced as difficult to manage, where their skills were challenged and (b) situations where they experienced mastery and that they could manage what was required of them.

(a) Difficult and challenging cases

It became clear that some cases were perceived as so stressful for these social workers that working with one single family occupied most of their working hours. Two of the social workers described situations where their lack of preparation for taking responsibility for managing difficult cases was evident. In both of the cases, it was complex child care cases that had been assigned to these social workers who had no prior experience of these kinds of tasks:

This case has been absolutely chaotic. The children have been placed in out – of-home – care for one year and I am their third social worker during this time. There have been a lot of conflicts around this family. The children have begun to disclose difficult experiences. Before I went on sick-leave this case took almost all of my time. (Social worker J)

This situation had led to Social Worker J, after working six months as social worker, taking sick leave:

I began to worry about everything and it led to a flood of worries in my head. I could not stop it. So I got sleeping pills and then I became sick ... (Social worker J)

The other of these two social workers described a case that was not originally hers as she was not working with child cases. Due to a staffing crisis some child cases were assigned to social workers in other sections and she was given this case. This serious case resulted in a decision to take the child into compulsory care. She tried to say no to taking responsibility for this case as she had never before conducted assessments of children or adolescents:

I tried to say that it's not right that I who have no experience should have the responsibility of a case where we are considering if the child needs to be taken into compulsory care. But it did not help. I was later told that this case is one of the most difficult that we have in our unit ... and I did not know it then. (Social Worker I)

Shortly after she was assigned as one of two social workers on this case, the lead social worker went on long term sick-leave which was why she was given full responsibility for the case. During the interview, she returned again and again to this particular case and it became apparent how difficult she found it and how desperate she felt about the situation she was facing.

The inappropriateness for an inexperienced social worker to be responsible for complex child or youth cases has often been noted (see Agllias, 2010; Bates et al., 2010; Bradley, 2008; Healy et al., 2009; Healy & Meagher, 2007; Jack & Donnellan, 2010; Tham, 2007b). These two social workers' descriptions clearly illustrate this.

These two cases raise issues concerning the employee's health and well-being and lack of experience on the quality of the work undertaken with clients which can both be explored in terms of the responsibility of the employer. In one of these two cases, this social worker was the third practitioner in one year for these children and her sick – leave meant that a fourth now was activated. In the second case, this social worker described that she was forced to take responsibility for the case even though she was aware from the outset that it was too difficult for her. Her repeated request to the supervisor about giving the responsibility of this difficult case to someone more experienced had not been accepted.

(b) Positive and manageable experiences

As in the previous interview, when these social workers were asked to describe situations where they felt that they could use their expertise and do a good job, their answers were always linked to direct contact with clients and progress in relation to the clients' wellbeing and development.

One difference in comparison to the previous interviews, (when the social workers had only worked four months in the profession) was that while last time it was about having managed to establish contact with a client the social workers now were taking clients' development and behavioural change into account:

When you see people grow, they believe in themselves again. (Social worker A)

When you can instill some sort of hope in clients, or when you see that you actually are working together with the client toward something and you can see that something is happening. (Social worker G)

When one sees clients who when they arrive here (to the treatment center) are in very poor condition, after a while are getting color in their faces again. (Social worker C)

These descriptions capture relational practices and observation of positive practice outcomes. These practitioners seem to be reflecting on fulfilling the social work mandate and goal of establishing impactful helping relationships and achieving observable outcomes. This focus on 'outcomes that matter' resonates generally with the 'competency' stage (stage 3) as described by Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986).

Theme 3. The acquisition and development of skills

Meetings with clients

When the social workers were asked to reflect on and describe how their skills had developed over the 20 months since they graduated, many of the reflections concerned client meetings:

I have learned how to meet with clients, gained an understanding of what affects others, my theoretical understanding has been consolidated. (Social worker B)

I now know what questions to ask, what works and what does not work in meetings. (Social worker A)

Learning how to 'read' people

During the previous interview at 4 months it became clear that some of the newly qualified social workers had been exposed to threats and violence (see Tham & Lynch, 2019), and one of them had sought treatment for the trauma it caused. Therefore, this time, they were asked about threats and violence. This was described by all of the social workers as a part of their work; a bomb threat, colleagues who were threatened to be killed, or had been locked in by a client. From the responses it became clear that the new practitioners now had learned to identify personal risks, and therefore were able to avoid threatening situations. The social worker who, during the very first time in the profession had been exposed to a serious situation of threats and violence when she alone met an aggressive client, described that she now had become 'better at reading people' (Social worker A).

This can be seen as an example of a more reflexive and intuitive thinking, which by Munro (2005) described as a characteristic of more experienced social worker's ability where past experience was included in the assessment: 'I would not go on house visits to clients who I suspect may be threatening' (Social worker I). This also resonates with the development of expertise according to Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) where practitioners draw on accumulated experience and 'intuitively' recognise new situations; 'I try as much as possible, avoid putting myself in situations that could be threatening' (Social worker A). As an example, she described:

We had a client who was released after being held in solitary confinement for almost the entire time in prison to whom we were considering making a home visit. So we collected so much information as possible about this client, and after that we decided not to make a home visit. We did not want to expose ourselves to the risk. (Social worker A)

Another social worker had asked the supervisor if she could be removed from one of her cases as she experienced great discomfort when she met this client. Her request was accepted and the case was given to a more experienced social worker.

Reflections on social work education

Many of the social workers now expressed greater satisfaction with their social work education than at the previous interview. It was as if social work education now could be seen with new, more forgiving, glasses. The reflections often focused on the personal and professional development their education had led to:

When I now think about the education, I realize that I changed a lot during it; as a person and regarding my values, how I think about things and how I see problems and solutions. I developed a lot. (Social worker A)

It's pretty strange that even if you think you have not had so much useful knowledge from the education one thinks nevertheless quite similar as social workers. You get a special/common way of thinking as a social worker. (Social worker F)

However, a lack of 'reality' in their education was expressed:

I had needed to know more about how social work - how to deal with social services! What it does with you – what 'seat' you end up in as a social worker. (Social Worker G)

Sometimes I get the feeling that the School of Social Work has not kept pace with how things have developed in the social services. (Social Worker J)

This re-emphasises the importance of social work education providing social work students with a realistic idea of their future work (Agllias, 2010; Pösö & Forsman, 2013).

Thoughts about the future

Although these new practitioners only had worked at the most for 20 months as social workers, many already expressed a desire to do something else. Half-jokingly answers included to work as a photographer, baker, with potted plants or standing at the fish counter which are reflected in the title of the paper. Otherwise the answers contained much about where the new practitioners did *not* want to work i.e. in social services. Only one of those who were working in social services wanted to continue with it, but not in the same work area as now, and with longer contacts with clients. As in the previous interviews, it was most preferred to work with youth who voluntarily contacted social services themselves.

Discussion

This study has provided some insight into how the first years in the profession for a newly qualified social worker can be perceived. As the third phase of a longitudinal study, it enables a broader view of the development of professional expertise from leaving university to the first years in practice as a professional social worker. The Dreyfus and Dreyfus framework (1986) enabled us to position some of the study participant's experiences along a developmental journey of building expertise in their profession.

So, how did these twelve social workers experience their first years in the profession? To what extent were their expectations fulfilled? While all of these individuals had their own story to tell and their own unique pathway, points of convergence emerged. *The first* and most prominent theme was the disappointment and frustration that those who worked in social services expressed about the limited opportunities to do a good job. Budget constraints and restrictive and dysfunctional organisations where too outspoken people were dismissed and where practitioners were forced to 'trick the system' to achieve positive outcomes for clients were described. In the interviews, the social workers reiterated that this was not what they had expected, either in terms of the job or how the organisation functioned. Some had already left the social services and were clear about that they did not want to return. Except for one participant who was still employed in social services, all of them wanted to work elsewhere in the future.

How can these results be interpreted? Why was the work in social services experienced as so difficult? The influence of New Public Management (NPM) on social workers' working conditions, where the managerial and reductionist approaches of NPM shift the focus from relationship-based and contextualised social work practice to technical measures of worker performance and service outputs (Buckley, 2008; Garrett, 2019; Harlow et al., 2013) is increasingly reported also in Sweden (Bejerot et al., 2015; Höjer & Forkby, 2011; Jönsson, 2019; Lauri, 2019; Shanks et al., 2015; Tham, 2018). Many of the descriptions in the present study resonate with the influence of NPM, where economic rationalisation and bureaucracy are prioritised rather than the profession's ethics and collegiality (Jönsson, 2019; Lauri, 2019; Liljegren & Parding, 2010). Increased administrative burdens, documentation requirements leading to weakening professional discretion force social workers to spend much more time in front of the computer than in meeting clients (Burton & van den Broek, 2009; Healy, 2009; Munro, 2011; Swedish Government Report, 2017). Studies investigating the consequences of the reorganisation of the public sector in Sweden and the introduction of NPM, have found that work environment as well as professional autonomy had deteriorated (Bejerot et al., 2017).

That all, except for one, of these newly educated social workers who were in social services wanted to do something else in the future and showed much disappointment for an occupation in which they had invested significantly through their education is concerning not only for the social workers but for the people who need professional help. That vulnerable children placed in out of home care have to meet and connect with new social workers several times during their placement, as illustrated here, contradicts knowledge about the importance of continuity of care for vulnerable children.

The second prominent theme echoes the findings of the two previous interviews where these new graduates expressed a lack of preparation for the reality of social work practice. Some of these practitioner's reflections on the disconnect between their social work education and practice realities seemed to indicate what authors have described as 'moral distress' (Mänttari-van der Kuip, 2016; Weinberg, 2009) which adversely impacts on the health and well-being of practitioners. Consequently, authors have highlighted the need to prepare social work students for moral challenges in contemporary contexts dominated by managerialism and bureaucracy seems important (Lynch & Forde, 2016).

Studies among social work students have shown appreciation of topics considered relevant to practice (Moriarty et al., 2011), a desire to include practical exercises in the training (Wilson, 2012), as well as a more 'reality-based' education (Bradley, 2008). This illustrates the vulnerability of new practitioners with little or no experience of the work, beginning their careers in workplaces hampered by high workload, staff turnover and vacancies. The importance of workplace induction is highlighted in several previous studies among social workers (Agllias, 2010; Bates et al., 2010; Carpenter et al., 2015; Moorhead et al., 2016; Moriarty et al., 2011; Munro, 2011).

That social workers who have no experience of investigating child and adolescents' situations experience difficulties in dealing with the anxiety difficult childhood or youth issues can arouse, is clearly illustrated in this study and the importance of protecting new graduates from ending up in such difficult situations is underlined. Several studies have highlighted the need for an introductory period, supervision and supportive workplace relationships particularly for recent graduates who start their careers with investigating children and young people's situations (Agllias, 2010; Bates et al., 2010; Bradley, 2008; Healy et al., 2009; Healy & Meagher, 2007; Jack & Donnellan, 2010; Moorhead, 2019).

Concluding remarks

The difficulties illustrated in these social workers' stories reflect the situation that prevails in many areas of practice. The two main findings concern *firstly* the dissatisfaction that the practitioner's expressed about working in the social services and the difficulties they encountered to do a good job – the job they had expected to do. *Secondly*, the lack of training in practical skills from the

education and the need for further training at the workplace. Among the professional roles described in these new practitioners' stories, the role as a social worker in statutory social services, and especially in child welfare, appeared to be a role too difficult for a newly qualified social worker to handle. A generalist education as the social work education presupposes that the newly graduated social worker is given the opportunity by the employer to acquire the specific skills required for the work to begin her career, something that according to the social workers included in this study, was rarely realised. Besides the lack of preparation from social work education, the responsibility of employers to offer the newly educated social workers an adequate induction to the work and workplace where support from the supervisor and a manageable caseload where the difficulty of the cases match their level of competence is further highlighted.

These results indicate a need for further studies in the area where a larger group of students are followed from university into the profession to provide a more comprehensive picture of the transition from social work education to working life. There seems to be a need to further examine how well prepared the new graduates perceive themselves to be for the demands placed on them in different workplaces in the profession, how the introduction to the work and workplace takes place and to what extent the employers are providing the necessary support, supervision and training in the job-specific skills required. This is particularly pressing in the contemporary environment where rationalisation and control within NPM systems impact on the role of the social workers through restricting professional autonomy and placing less emphasis on relationship-based helping processes.

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