

Ready or Not, Here We Come: Field Education and Developing a Professional Identity

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This paper explores my experiences conducting a field seminar for bachelor of social work (BSW) students. I discuss the transformational process of moving from student to professional and my observations during this fourteen-week course. From my early concerns about their readiness to enter their field placement to their acquisition of a professional identity, the students demonstrate that professional identity development is a process that can have a rocky start, but result in a positive outcome.

Beginning

Eighty students sat in the medium-size auditorium, anxiously awaiting the beginning of the initial field seminar. In two days they would begin their social work field experience where they would be expected to demonstrate the knowledge, skills, values, and demeanor of professional social workers. Yet, despite their excitement, which was contagious, I felt a small degree of unease. Listening to their chatter and observing their interactions and dress, I have to admit I was less than certain that these undergraduate students were ready to handle the responsibilities that would soon be thrust upon them.

There they sat, dressed in attire that was typical of students on most college campuses: T-shirts and baggy shorts. Both men and women alike wore some variation of the same uniform: oversized shirts, khaki shorts, and flip-flops. Some looked as though they had just rolled out of bed, others were more pulled together, but none were dressed professionally. It is important to note that instructions regarding the field seminar given to students prior to its start did not include a dress code; however, it was disconcerting to see how little importance seemed to be attached to their attire and the image that was being projected.

Although they had not officially reported to their internship site, it still seemed somewhat incongruous that they were not dressed more

professionally. As the morning progressed and we began to discuss the expectations of internship, it wasn't only their attire that was cause for concern; their demeanor and the nature of their comments and questions raised my eyebrows as well. With few exceptions, the students did not seem serious. In fact, their behavior was more reminiscent of young adolescents than pre-professionals. I was not alone; the other faculty members, who along with me were conducting the field seminar, were equally put off by what we were witnessing.

Questions and comments were about process more than anything. "How many pages should written assignments be?" "How will grades be assigned?" Few had questions or comments regarding the field experience itself. Even when the orientation focused on more substantive content, such as the application of theory to practice, the students seemed more focused on what was required of them.

Other behavior was also cause for concern. Some were using their cell phones to send and receive text messages, and others were also engaged with their mobile devices—holding on to them or just staring off into them. Even when we asked that they put them away, they continued to surreptitiously use their cell phones. We faculty members were accustomed to this kind of behavior in the classroom, and have had spirited discussions about classroom management amongst ourselves; but here in field seminar, which held such importance for their future as professionals, including their ability

to perform competently and reach their overall goal of obtaining a professional degree, their behavior seemed especially disingenuous. Some were distracted, not listening to what was being communicated. Others were engaged in conversations with their neighbors. We had broken the group into smaller, (what we thought would be) more manageable, groups; yet, their behavior did not improve much. The small discomfort that I felt early on grew to a full-blown panic by mid-morning. I had expected to observe hopeful anticipation about the experience that they were about to embark upon. I thought I would see nervous anxiety; after all, they were moving into unknown territory. They had no idea what the experience would be like, what kind of relationships they would develop, or how they would measure up (Shulman, 2005). It would seem that on some level trepidation would be apparent. In fact, it has been argued that learning can be enhanced by small levels of nervous anticipation (Gelman & Baum, 2010).

Their having progressed to the point that they were entering field was evidence that these students had successfully mastered the curriculum. Wasn't it? Or, had they simply mastered test taking and paper writing, with no internalization of what it really means to be a professional and a social worker? The internship is generally considered the capstone aspect of the social work educational experience (Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010). It is during internship that students are expected to demonstrate the persona of a practicing professional (Loseke & Cahill, 1986).

Understanding fully that developing a professional identity is a process that occurs over time, I have always felt that my responsibility as a faculty member in a department of social work is to teach theoretical concepts, social work values, and ethics, while imparting the skills necessary for competent practice. I also hope that the learning environment I am responsible for creating includes opportunities for socialization into a new role identity, and that the educational experiences are also transitional in nature. I assume that the role-plays, case studies, and application papers that are so integral to BSW education will facilitate movement from student to professional; from chrysalis to butterfly. Therefore, I have also assumed that by the time students are entering internship, the transition would be nearly

complete. Yet, to my dismay, these students seemed to be holding on to their student identity for dear life.

Quite frankly, I saw little evidence that these students were prepared to perform in a professional capacity. My disappointment stemmed from my fear that as a social work educator, I had failed to provide adequate preparation for competent social work practice. Social work education provides students with a theoretical foundation on which to base professional practice, and also involves acculturation to the profession by studying its history, learning its values base and philosophy, and observing professors and other practicing professionals (Knight, 2001). Indeed, the Council on Social Work Education's *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (EPAS) standard 2.1.2 states that an expected educational outcome is that students will "identify as professional social workers and conduct themselves accordingly" (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2008, p. 3). Implicit in the EPAS is that identification as a professional social worker is an expected outcome after having undergone the process of learning the history of the profession, adapting the values, and understanding its mission.

As a result of faculty observations, we modified some of the agenda for that first seminar and included discussion on the professional self. In addition to outlining expectations of professional practice, we discussed how competence is demonstrated. At the end of the day we sent them off to begin their work, and (hopefully) develop a professional identity. Field visits would not begin until a few weeks into their internships, and the next seminar was one month away. Would our next contact with the students yield different outcomes? We would see.

Becoming

One month later, the students returned as scheduled to their second seminar. Some field visits had occurred in the meantime. We learned the students were making good progress. Not one problem was reported. Some were making better progress than others toward developing competency in areas stipulated by the EPAS, but each evaluation that was conducted returned a positive result. There was a range of internships, including positions with the

department of children services, the department of public health, hospice, community medical centers, substance abuse centers, and juvenile residential facilities. The students, according to the field instructors, were eager to learn and demonstrate the ability to apply what they learned in the classroom to actual practice. Despite the encouraging reports, I still approached the second field seminar with both expectation and dread. Would they appear this time as disinterested as before? Did they have the capacity to move beyond process into more substantive areas? I eagerly anticipated getting my questions answered.

One by one they began to arrive, not in the boisterous manner that marked the initial seminar meeting. No, on the whole they seemed more quiet and reflective. There was none of the loud chatter of before, but more restrained conversations were evident as they compared experiences. This seminar required formal presentations about their placement. They were to have learned organizational structure, mission, goals, and objectives, and then they were to present cogent description of what they had learned. The students met the requirements of the assignment but some were better prepared than others. Additionally, some were clearly more invested in their agencies. Still, overall the presentations were good. Their questions and comments reflected critical thought and analysis. I asked the students if they themselves were aware of any differences in their level of professionalism. According to many, there had been a definite change that they attributed to the accountability that was an inherent part of the field. Social workers are accountable to their agencies, supervisors, and clients (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2008). The students were emphatic that the more that was expected of them, the more they were required to stretch to meet the expectations.

As I said, change was more evident in some than in others. However, on the whole, these students were engaged and excited to discuss their experiences. In one month they had already experienced so much. They talked about what it was like to navigate the workplace, dealing with different personalities and work styles. They discussed the work in which they were engaged with various types of clients (Maidment, 2003). They reported what it was like to physically travel to unfamiliar locations. These were exactly the kinds of experiences I expected

would take place during the internship experience. They were professionals in the making.

Transformation

At last the day arrived for the final field seminar. All of the field visits had been completed. After fourteen weeks of working in a professional capacity, the students returned to examine the experience and complete the final requirements. During this session, the students would present projects that they conceived and implemented during their placements. In conjunction with their field instructors, the students were to develop an intervention that served large groups of clients and met a community or organizational need. What a difference a few months had made. They had been instructed to dress as they would if they were conducting a professional presentation. There were also clearly defined objectives included in the project. While each student cleared the hurdle of meeting the minimum requirements for the assignment, there were some who soared above the rest. For example, one group of students conducted a thorough statewide examination of social work licensure passage rates, to try to predict the workforce capacity in the state. This was an excellent presentation. The students were enthusiastic, committed, and proud of what they had accomplished. One student stated, "This was the most difficult task I've had to do in school, but I learned so much, and I understand what you all have been teaching us about preparation for practice." Compared to other presentations, such as one where some students described compiling a resource manual, there was a clear distinction between the students who had not stretched themselves and were only fulfilling the minimum requirements to complete the class, and those who were motivated by an internal drive to engage in meaningful work.

These were the students who demonstrated the most preparedness for professional practice. Their projects were conceptually strong, reflecting a link between various theories and practice. Their presentations also conveyed significant involvement in the projects. The superior presentations were creative and showed they had taken a concept and run with it. When these students delivered their presentations, there was a noticeable difference in the room. Discussion was sparked, the students were interested in each presentation, and this was as

near as one could get to a professional discussion among peers.

Although some students excelled more than others, during the final seminar none of the indifference and immaturity was displayed that had so concerned me at the first seminar session. They had transformed themselves and seemed ready to enter professional practice. The excitement and hopeful anticipation that were lacking during the initial seminar meeting were now in full display during our final meeting. Many could clearly articulate how their field experience had helped them develop into their professional selves (Loseke and Cahill, 1986). In her reflections, one student commented, "Over the past few months, everything that was taught in the classroom became clear; all of the dots were finally connected."

Beginning Again

At the time these students were being launched into the world of professional social work practice, I was prepping for courses with students who were entering the social work program. My summer experience informed my preparations in ways that I never anticipated. I made a conscious decision to brief students on the internship experience starting very early in their program. I decided it was not only necessary to ensure that students have ample opportunity to apply theory to practice, I must convey the link between theory, internship, and professional practice. I learned that I must incorporate expectations for internship into the classroom experience. I learned that I learned as much as these students.

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