Article

Social work bachelor students' knowledge awareness during field practice: students' perspectives

by

Evelyn Sandøy Ottesen
Assistant Professor
Department of Social Studies, University of Stavanger
Norway
E-mail: evelyn.s.ottesen@uis.no

Ingunn T. Ellingsen
Professor
Department of Social Studies, University of Stavanger
Norway
E-mail: ingunn.t.ellingsen@uis.no

Elisabeth Willumsen
Professor
Faculty of Health Studies, University of Stavanger
Norway
E-mail: elisabeth.willumsen@uis.no

_____

Abstract

Social work has increasingly become a research-based discipline, while at the same time acknowledging the importance of knowledge gained through practical experience and user knowledge. Awareness of various forms of knowledge becomes particularly relevant to practice as it constitutes a framework for understanding and addressing social problems in real-life situations. This article presents findings from a Q methodological study exploring social work bachelor students' perspectives on knowledge after taking part in research-oriented activities during field practice placement in Norwegian welfare organizations. The aim of the study was to explore how bachelor students of social work understand and find knowledge useful to social work practice. Q methodology aims at revealing shared perspectives, and facilitates comparison between perspectives. Three perspectives on knowledge emerged from the study. The first emphasizes the importance of combining experience-based knowledge and research-based knowledge. The second suggests an orientation towards research-based knowledge as a strategy for innovation, while the third focuses on an active and confident, yet critical, use of research-based knowledge when working with service users. Field placements as arenas for enhancing students' knowledge awareness, and bridging various forms of knowledge, are discussed in light of these findings.

Keywords: social work students, knowledge awareness, field placement, Q methodology

INTRODUCTION

Developing the knowledge base in social work is essential for informing and coping with the complexities of professional practice (Ask, 2014; Orme & Powell, 2007). Increasing complexity and new demands in social work, such as efficiency, new technologies and new tools for practice (Andreassen & Fossestøl, 2011; Sletten & Ellingsen, 2020), challenge the way new and relevant knowledge can be generated. As such, research-based knowledge constitutes an important source for renewing the profession (Fisher, 2002; Lyneborg & Damgaard, 2019; Noordengraaf, 2015). However, research suggests that social workers demonstrate limited use of research-based knowledge in their daily practice (Bergmark & Lundström, 2002; Avby, Nilsen, & Ellström, 2017; Labonte-Roset, 2005). Avby et al. (2017) found, for example, that social workers preferred practice-based knowledge, and rarely consulted knowledge from research or other sources; besides, research was often used to legitimize assumptions made on other grounds. By the same token, McFadden et al. (2012) claim that social workers need to develop skills that enable them to identify relevant research for social work practice. That being said, the complex situations social workers deal with in their everyday practice also require sensible, local knowledge (Noordengraaf, 2015; Rød, 2015). Hence, it is important that social work students understand the significance of various forms of knowledge when dealing with the challenges the profession and service users face.

Internationally, practice learning is an important part of social work education (Finch, 2015; Zuchowski, 2016). Field placements are found to be beneficial not only for the students, as on-site supervisors also report positive outcomes, such as understanding new theories, increased reflective practice and improved relationships with the universities (Barton, Bell, & Bowles, 2005). Moreover, during field placements, students need to critically engage in the practice context, which may facilitate a dynamic connection between academic and practice learning (Bellinger, 2010). One way of encouraging the use of knowledge in practice is to develop students' understanding of various forms of research, also called 'research mindedness' (Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2005). Research mindedness can be seen as a unifying concept implying a new understanding of expertise as networked proficiency that arises from sustained collaborative efforts to solve problems and build knowledge. Karvinen-Niinikoski (2005) claims that reflexive and innovative networked

expertise is in accordance with the need to cope with the ever-changing complexity inherent in everyday social work practices. As such, research mindedness is not only about being aware of research-based knowledge, it also requires analytical thinking in order to have the potential for generating novel ways of thinking and new practices. Hence, we argue that 'minding research' may assist new understandings on how to address social needs and human interactions through a critical reflective practice.

The concept of 'knowledge', and how various forms of knowledge relate to social work practice, is much debated. Such debates may lead to a dichotomy between research and practice (Levin, 2015). Consequently, researchers have argued for a knowledge concept including both (Levin, 2015; Rød, 2015). Our point of departure is that research-based knowledge together with other forms of knowledge, including practice-knowledge, should be regarded as an intertwined base for understanding social problems, and for social work practice. This is in line with international higher education guidelines, and the relationship between higher education and local actors has become a priority area in Norway (Ministry of Education and Research, 2012), focusing on establishing partnerships between academia and the practice field in research. This view calls for close and cooperative relationships between practitioners and academics, as well as students. Bachelor students in social work are in a unique position as, during field placements, they are positioned at the interface between academia and practice.

In this article, we present findings from a Q methodological (QM) study exploring students' perspectives on knowledge application in social work practice after field placement. The background for the study was a project in which bachelor students at a university in Norway were assigned to relate and apply knowledge to real-life situations and problems while in field placement. The students were to: i) define issues or questions for exploration based on their practice experiences, ii) explore these questions by actively searching for research and literature of relevance, and iii) critically reflect upon findings and how they could be applied in practice. The aim of this activity was to help students develop analytical skills and increase their knowledge awareness (see Kroken, Ottesen, & Willumsen, 2019). After taking part in the field placement activity, we invited the students to take part in our research

exploring students' knowledge awareness. The research question for this article is: *How do bachelor students in social work understand and find knowledge useful to social work practice while in field placement*? Based on our findings, we discuss the role of social work education in bridging various form of knowledge and exploring field placement as an arena for enhancing students` knowledge awareness.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Knowledge-based practice in social work

Social work is a practice-based profession and academic discipline that promotes development and social change guided by principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity (IFSW, 2014). In the effort to promote development and social change, it is crucial to produce knowledge that can be adapted to practice to deal with social problems and improve services. According to Nortvedt et al. (2012), knowledge-based practice is context-dependent and consists of three types of knowledge: First, *Research-based Knowledge*, obtained by systematic approaches and methods that are reliable and can be disseminated orally and by publications. This type of knowledge is transferable, and has the potential to give direction for practice. Second, *Experience-based Knowledge*, obtained individually in clinical experience. Experience-based knowledge can be both explicit and implicit understandings of the situation where the service is taking place. Due to tacit elements of knowledge, such knowledge can be difficult to transfer solely by verbal descriptions (Gilje, 2017). The latter relates to Polanyi's well-known concept of 'tacit dimension', denoting that we know more than we can express (Polanyi, 1966/2000). Thirdly, *User Knowledge*, which is obtained when working together with service users and taking part in their experiences, provides knowledge about their lives and situations in a given context. When combining these three forms of knowledge to address the complex practice of social work and the specific task at hand, a practical synthesis takes place (Grimen, 2008). In other words, the particular practical synthesis is designed for the relevant professional performance connected to the current 'case'. Social work's knowledge base may be regarded as an area of tension between the various forms of knowledge, as different actors may have different understandings of the type of knowledge most relevant to specific issues and questions (Rød, 2015).

The term 'Communities of practice' introduced by Wenger (1998) may be helpful in understanding how students gain and apply knowledge in practice settings. During field placement, students face incidents and situations that will challenge their knowledge and skills. In communities of practice, supervisors and colleagues are important actors, from which students can learn, find meaning and develop a professional identity (Wenger, 1998; Jørgensen & Hadders, 2015). Processes of 'learning' and 'knowing' influence and help shape what we do, who we are and how we interpret what we do, including as individuals, communities and organizations (Wenger, 1998). As a result, field placement comprises a unique opportunity to practice knowledge application in real-life situations, as well as developing a professional identity as social workers. Donald Schön (1991) made an important contribution when introducing his account of how professional knowledge is inherent in practice situations. He argues that professionals, by 'reflection in action' and 'reflection on action' after the event, can develop their professional knowledge and expertise. As such, he acknowledges the knowledge that derives from reflections upon practice experience. Moreover, critical reflection involves analysing how the share of power impacts professional relationships and professional practice (Fook & Askeland, 2009). This involves analysing whose interests are at stake, and how power is exercised in everyday professional practice. Consequently, it is important to reflect critically upon what kind of knowledge is given priority in decision-making processes in social work. Hence, we argue that it is important that students learn to engage in meaningful practice settings that can stimulate knowledge awareness and encourage their development of a critical reflective knowledge base applicable to social work practice.

METHOD

Q methodology (QM) is gaining ground among researchers in different fields (Watts & Stenner, 2012), and the method aims at revealing clusters of shared beliefs, viewpoints and other subjective standpoints (Brown, 1980; McKeown & Thomas, 2013). Statements developed to cover a wide range of viewpoints on the research topic are sorted by participants in accordance with how they relate themselves to the statements (typically from most like my experience to most unlike my experience). A by-person factor analysis reveals factors (often referred to as perspectives) statistically formed by participants who share similar views (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

QM was chosen because it is found to be an efficient tool for exploration and comparison of different viewpoints (Ellingsen et al., 2010; Watts & Stenner, 2012). Because Q methodology can be considered a combined qualitative and quantitative method, a large number of participants is not required (Brown, 1980; Watts & Stenner, 2012; Shemmings & Ellingsen, 2012). Furthermore, elaborations from participants on their Q sorts enrich the data with additional insights when interpreting the various factors.

Participants

Three bachelor students and three field placement supervisors contributed to the development of statements (year 2013). After field placement (year 2014 and 2015), an open invitation to take part in the Q study was provided to the students in class and by e-mail, in which 17 responded positively (see Table 1 for an overview of participants in the two stages of the study). Students received written and oral information about the study. It was also emphasized that participation was voluntary, and written consent from the students was obtained before participation.

Table 1: *The table shows an overview of participants in the different stages along with the purpose of stages*

Overview of participants		Purpose
First stage: Qualitative interviews	3 BA SW students 3 field placement supervisors	Generating statements for the Q study – statements that have the potential of eliciting different viewpoints on the research theme
Second stage: Q sort + qualitative comments on the Q sort	17 BA SW students	Explore perspectives among BA on knowledge application during field placement
Third stage: Analysis and interpretation		Reveal existing viewpoints among the participants on the research theme
Participants in total	**23**	

Generating statements

The process of generating the statements builds on the Concourse Theory of Communication (Stephenson, 1953). A concourse can be explained as the universe of statements, opinions, views, etc. surrounding a topic (Watts & Stenner, 2012). When searching for the concourse, it is common to conduct interviews with a small group of people familiar with the research topic, but statements may also originate from literature and everyday talk (Brown, 1980). In this study, individual interviews with three students and three supervisors were conducted for the purpose of identifying the concourse. This resulted in a large number of possible statements. When sorted, the composition of statements will elicit the participant's point of view. Therefore, it is crucial that the set of statements represents a wide variety of expressions on the topic so that different viewpoints can be conveyed. A careful and systematic reduction of the possible statements was performed by applying a 'Fisher Block Balance Design', which is a helpful tool for condensing statements (see Stephenson, 1953). This procedure resulted in a final set of 27 statements (see Table 3).

The Q sorting procedure

The 17 students were asked to rank the statements into a scheme corresponding with the number of statements (see Figure 1). Each vertical row represents a gradual weighting from most unlike my experience (the minus side of the scheme) to most like my experience (the plus side), with a centring area for statements that are ambivalent (either/or) or considered neutral. Statements placed at the outer ends have a high psychological significance for the participants, regardless of being placed on the positive or negative side of the scheme. This means that they are valued as an important aspect in the representation of the participants' view. Centred statements have a low psychological significance for the participants, as they are deemed as less important or neutral. The Q sorting procedure can preferably be treated as an interview setting, which also demonstrates how the sorting procedure can in essence be seen as a qualitative approach (Shemmings & Ellingsen, 2012). Participants were therefore invited to elaborate on the statements and their Q sort during the sorting procedure, and comments were recorded and transcribed. Such comments add valuable data for the interpretation of the factors.

Most unlike my experience								Most like my experience
-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4

Figure 1: *The Q sort scheme used in this study, with columns corresponding with the number of statements (27).*

Analysis and interpretation

All the participants' Q sorts were factor-analysed using the PQmethod, a software programme designed for Q methodological studies (Schmolck, 2002). While traditional factor analysis builds on by-variable correlations, factors in QM derive from Q sort correlations, or correlations between each individual's perspectives (Watts & Stenner, 2012). The PQmethod allows for different analytical strategies; however, the principal Component analyses with a Varimax rotation of three factors provided the clearest results for further inspection. When interpreting the perspectives that emerge from the factors, we examined the overall configuration to acquire an overview of each perspective. Furthermore, distinguishing statements, that means statements that are significantly unique for each factor, and statements with a high psychological significance (a high positive or negative score) were carefully examined in the light of comments from the participants who defined each of the three factors.

Ethical considerations

This study was discussed with the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). At the point of data collection, no formal approval was required as the study concerned no sensitive themes, and no detectable information about the participants was gathered. Yet, the study was performed in accordance with Norwegian guidelines for research ethics in the social sciences, law and humanities (NESH, 2016).

RESULTS

The by-person factor analysis resulted in three factors. The correlation between the factors varied (between 1 and 2, r=.36, between 2 and 3, r= .64, and between 1 and 3, r= .44). A relatively high correlation between Factors 2 and 3 indicates some overlap however, there are distinguishing statements that suggest important differences between the two factors. For this reason, we kept all three factors for further interpretation. Table 2 provides an overview of how the 17 Q sorts correlate with the factors, while Table 3 presents the typical statement score (from -4 to +4) on each factor. Because each factor represents a shared view among the participants defining the factors, we will refer in the following to the factors as perspectives.

Table 2: *Overview of each participant`s Q-sort factor loading. The Q-sorts with a significant loading on factor are marked with an X (p=<.05). Two participants (QS5 and QS9) do not influence any factor, as neither factor explains more than half of the common variance for these participants. Nevertheless, the factor loading indicates their Q sort's correlation with the factor.*

Q sort	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
QS1	.16	.51	**.64X**
QS2	.11	**.68X**	.04
QS3	.03	**.87X**	.21
QS4	.29	-.04	**.73X**
QS5	.34	.14	.38
QS6	-.03	.47	**.75X**
QS7	**.70X**	.57	.06
QS8	.58	.15	**.61X**
QS9	.32	.48	.36
QS10	**.78X**	.13	.41
QS11	**.68X**	-.04	.05
QS12	**.60X**	.51	.09
QS13	**.66X**	.17	.50
QS14	**.83X**	-.06	.41
QS15	.28	.13	**.86X**
QS16	**.77X**	.34	.23
QS17	**.66X**	.42	.27

Table 3: *Overview of how the participants associated with Factors 1, 2 and 3, respectively, typically rated each statement. Distinguishing statements are marked with * (*p=<.05) and (**p=<.01), which means that statements are given a score that is significantly unique for that one factor.*

No.	Statement	Factor score		
		Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
1	You must have a higher education in order to understand and be interested in research	-4	-3	-2
2	When we call something research, it quickly becomes 'lofty' and incomprehensible	-2	0	-1
3	Research is important for me to be innovative	1*	4	4
4	I read research in order to explore and find new solutions to issues	1	1	2
5	The word 'research' scares me	-3	0**	-3
6	Being research-oriented makes me a better professional	2	3	2
7	We should think about research more in practice	3	2	1
8	Research is not really talked about at my workplace	-4	-2	-4
9	I have a good understanding of research, and this makes it easier to understand the research in my particular field	-1	-2	0*
10	I need professional updating all the time	4	3	4
11	Researchers do not deal with the same reality as social workers encounter daily	-1**	1	0
12	There are things other than research which help me to update my knowledge and strengthen my professional competence	1**	-2*	0*
13	I do not look for research literature in my daily work	0	2	-4**

14	I think knowledge based on experience is more important and more relevant than knowledge based on research	2	-3**	1
15	I often refer to research findings in my conversations with users	-1*	-4*	2**
16	For us to know that what we are doing works, it needs to be documented through research	2	4	3
17	Research is too problem focused and too little concerned with what works	-1*	1	1
18	My professional judgment is more important than what research says	1**	-4*	-2*
19	My impression is that those who have worked in practice for a long time are not particularly interested in research	-2	1**	-1
20	Research is good for creating motivation and job satisfaction	4**	-1**	1**
21	There is no time for research at my workplace	-2*	0	0
22	Research and practice are two different things, and my focus is on the practical	0	-1	-1
23	Research is confusing and creates insecurity in the job	-3	-2	-3
24	I am curious, and this allows me to have an interest in research	0	2	3
25	There is no focus on research unless the management keeps 'pushing' it	0	-1	-1
26	The biggest barrier to a focus on research lies with the management	0	-1	-2*
27	Focus on research gets forgotten unless it is permanently brought up at meetings, staff seminars, etc.	3**	-1	0

The three emerging perspectives have different characteristics. The first perspective, '*A combined experience and research-oriented approach',* is defined by eight students. The second perspective, '*Research reliance and innovation-oriented*' is represented by two students. The third, '*A critical and confident research-based approach: User and innovation orientated',* is represented by five students*.* The second and third factors have some common features, as both hold a more innovation-oriented approach. All three perspectives suggest a positive attitude towards research-based knowledge, though in different ways. In the following, we will present the perspectives in more depth, where we refer to statement numbers in parentheses. We also include comments from participants representing the factors to provide a deeper understanding of the revealed perspectives.

Factor 1: A combined experience and research-oriented approach
Students associated with this perspective believe research is important for motivation and enjoyment in their work (20). The overall configuration of the factor indicates that professional development is related to applying research-based knowledge to their practice. This does not necessarily mean that they find it easy to be research-oriented, as addressed by this student:

> It is difficult to limit it [the search for knowledge] to what you want to learn and what you should learn. With everything happening in the society…, we should keep track of so much. How should we deal with all the reports? There is so much we have to deal with, but then again, it is good to gain knowledge and updates on these things.

The search for knowledge can sometimes be overwhelming. Nevertheless, this student also expressed that she turned to her supervisor and other colleagues when she was unsure of something. Having an arena to discuss issues and share knowledge was important for students associated with this perspective, in which research orientation was seen as an ongoing issue at the workplace (8). Furthermore, these students revealed a confidence in relating to research, and did not find research confusing (23) or 'scary' (5).

Despite this perspective's research orientation, students associated with it did not tend to use research explicitly in their conversations with service users (15), as one of the students commented: 'Here, I come to teach you,' expressing that she does not want to be 'preachy'. She was concerned that service users would perceive a

practice of explicitly referring to research as didactic. Another student also commented on this:

> I think research can be somewhat limited. Clients should feel that we understand and are open to thoughts and opinions and acknowledge their knowledge, and in a way, research may delimit it [the client's perspectives].

The student addressed a concern of a possible conflict between research and the client perspective. The sorting of a statement concerning experience-based knowledge versus research-based knowledge (14) supports this; experience-based knowledge is also important, and may be even more important than research-based knowledge. The perspective represented by Factor 1 reveals a rather dualistic understanding of the relationship between research and practice (22). Moreover, this perspective does not necessarily view research-orientation as a condition for being innovative (3), and it concedes other ways to renew and gain professional development (12). Reading research to explore and find new solutions was not deemed important (4). Finally, this perspective suggests a neutral view on leaders' role in being research-oriented (25 and 26). At the same time, the student's experienced that research was on the agenda among the professionals (8). They also believed that a research-based practice requires a continuous attention to research and putting research on the agenda at meetings and seminars (27).

Factor 2: Research reliance and innovation oriented

The second perspective reveals a greater reliance on research-based knowledge, e.g., when it comes to knowing what works (16). The way other statements are sorted support this trust in research. These students revealed a higher confidence in research than their own professional judgment (18), and they considered research-based knowledge to be more significant than experience-based knowledge (14). However, one student problematized how research may become the prominent argument of reality, when saying:

> If we want to show something, it has to be documented through research to show that they are real facts, not just something we worked out without having relevant facts. The thing that was most helpful for us [during field placement] was to find relevant facts: direct information from clients at this office, information from other offices and… compare. We read other research findings, but the information could be maybe two years old, so we had to find out how it was right now.

She argued how relevant facts from different sources need to be put together and compared in order to be valid. As such, direct information from clients also

constitutes an important source of knowledge. Although two-year-old research can be considered novel knowledge, her message was that we need updated knowledge in order to respond to conditions in the present. Still, research provides important input for practitioners to grasp a fuller picture. Moreover, these students elaborated on how research impacted on their professional judgment during field placement. Research-based knowledge was seen as crucial for making good judgments, and for obtaining a more accurate understanding of the situation of the clients:

> We use a lot of discretion in our work, and research helped us get a better understanding of how the users end up in different situations, and it helped us do better assessments.

Understanding the interplay between different factors is important in understanding social problems, and these students found research especially helpful in that sense.

Despite being research-oriented, the students did not see research as particularly important for motivation and excitement in their work (20). Other statements that are typically deemed neutral concerns find research 'scary' (5) or difficult to grasp (2). Neutral statements are usually not given much thought because of a low significance to the participants. However, this perspective represents a view of research-based knowledge as a key premise for being innovative (3), and the overall configuration of statements emphasizes research as important – not only as a means for knowing what works, but also to be innovative and contributing to novel thinking in the field.

Factor 3: A critical and confident research-based approach: User and innovation-orientated

Students associated with the third perspective perceive research as crucial for being innovative (3). They relied on research when it came to documentation of outcomes (16), but did not feel as strongly regarding this as students associated with the second perspective. They were slightly more moderate than their fellow students in viewing research as superior to professional judgment (18). Nevertheless, more of an emphasis was put on research than on their professional judgment. One of the students associated with this perspective elaborated on this:

> You have a huge ego if you claim that your professional judgment is more important than research. Then you disregard the entire user group.

This student stressed that research is about listening to the service users and letting them have a say. She also seemed aware of the influence social workers have when she added:

> You've got too much influence if you actually emphasize your own judgments more than what comes out of research, such as user surveys.

One aspect that distinguishes this perspective from the other two is a more active use of research-based knowledge in practice (13). These students seemed to turn to research literature more frequently in order to find new solutions to problems (4), and they acknowledged that research can stimulate new ways of thinking. One student also expressed that research can provide more self-assurance in what you do:

> It [research] can give you new ideas and when you can rely on research, you can get more confidence in what you do.

She also thought that this way of working could inspire other colleagues in their work:

> When opening up for new ways to go, it may motivate the staff further.

This comment, along with the overall configuration of statements, suggests a stronger self-confidence in applying a research-based approach. These students did not consider being research orientated as demanding or stressful (5 and 23), and they were more likely than students associated with the other two perspectives to explicitly relate to research in their interaction with service users (15). They revealed a curiosity that created an engagement for research (24); in fact, curiosity was seen as essential to make gains from research:

> It`s important to have curiosity and to be interested in research in order to take advantage of it.

Similarly, with the first perspective, these students experienced that research was given a high priority in their field placement (8):

> Research is very interesting, and I listen carefully.

> Absolutely! Research…to get better and try to get better all the time […]I learnt a lot from the different subjects that were addressed during the work placement.

They expressed that thematic seminars focusing on research were valuable for their professional development, thereby suggesting a link between research orientation, shared discussions and professional development.

Consensus themes among students

Despite differences across the emerging perspectives, there are also statements that can be regarded as consensus statements indicating what participants have in common. In our study, there was consensus on eight statements (1, 4, 6, 7, 10, 22, 23 and 25), in which the majority were statements with a relatively low psychological significance (given a centred or neutral score). Overall, all perspectives suggest a positive attitude towards research, with research seen as important for professional development (6), thus implying that being research orientated will make students better skilled as social workers. They also expressed a readiness for continuous updates on knowledge (10), and linked the search for research to being able to provide the best services for users:

> I feel that if you are to use professional judgment towards other people's lives, you should know what you are doing, so that they can get the best we have to offer […]it requires updates and maintenance [of knowledge] and that you know what you`re doing.

> Gradually we realized …research helped us get a better understanding of, for example, the user's situation.

> When I did not have a clue about how to talk with children, I simply googled it. I found an article that was published, and then I sat down and read it like a madman before the talk with the child…

One student raised an important question when talking about an experience during her field placement:

> I searched for behavioural problems and such things, and found that conduct problems are easily construed as ADHD and not as neglect, despite similar symptoms. How can they determine that it is not neglect when the symptoms are the same?

The student addressed an important point, suggesting that research can possibly lead to a blind alley, and that it is important to reflect critically on what you read. However, they also expressed that research is food-for-thought, and that it 'helps create a larger space [for interventions]'.

Based on our findings, it is difficult to say whether the students would have reflected differently upon knowledge if they not had been given knowledge-oriented activities during field practice placement. Even so, the study revealed different perspectives, the first emphasizing the importance of combining an experience and research-oriented approach, while the second perspective shows a higher reliance on

research as a strategy for innovation. However, the third perspective reveals a more confident, yet critical, use of research-based knowledge when working with services users. Several students expressed that the field placement assignments contributed to an increased awareness of knowledge in their social work practice.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to obtain insights into bachelor students' knowledge awareness through exploring students' perspectives on knowledge and knowledge application in social work practice while in field placement. In light of our findings, we will discuss two themes: the role of social work education in bridging various forms of knowledge, in addition to practice and field placement as an arena for enhancing students' knowledge awareness.

The role of social work education

A higher education policy, both globally and nationally, encourages closer relationships between academia and practice fields in order to produce knowledge useful to society, and for addressing future challenges. This emphasizes the responsibility for social work education to awaken students' understanding of the significance of knowledge awareness and its potential for social change (Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development, 2012). By the same token, Norwegian White Paper No. 18 (2012-2013) focuses on the interplay between research, higher education and innovative practice (Ministry of Education and Research, 2012). The document emphasizes the need for students' involvement in so-called 'student active approaches' to research as early as the bachelor level, as this can provide increased scientific insight and motivate further professional development. Since 2020, social work education in Norway is required to offer 24 weeks of practice experience as part of the study programme, in which a minimum of 20 weeks must be in authentic practice situations (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). As such, social work education is in a unique position to initiate bridging activities between education and practice during field placement, which in itself demands a close collaboration between education and welfare agencies and organizations. That said, such bridging activities do not necessarily suggest a search for coherence between theory and practice, as there will always be tension between the two. However, such activities may help students to critically reflect upon such

tensions and to establish a meaningful understanding of the relationship between theory and practice, and how different types of knowledge are important to social work practice.

According to Grimen (2008), professional knowledge is theoretically fragmented because it consists of elements from different fields of knowledge, and lacks a theoretical unity. Furthermore, he argues, central to professional practice is that the knowledge base has a practical purpose, and thus the integration of knowledge is dependent on the demands of the professional performance, so-called 'practical synthesis' (Grimen 2008). Research shows that even experienced social workers can find it difficult to integrate knowledge into practice situations (Kojan & Storhaug, 2015). When students and experienced social workers engage in a situational enquiry, they can learn from each other and together increase their knowledge awareness. In our study, the students revealed different views on the significance of various types of knowledge that might illustrate their orientation towards practice and research, respectively. This notwithstanding, the goal is not necessarily to unify these views; yet, reflections upon the different existing views may contribute to increasing knowledge awareness in a way that moves social work practice forward. Social work students should be able to distinguish between- and synthesize various forms of knowledge and professional practice. As a result, field placement represents an opportunity to bridge perceived gaps between the knowledge base in social work and social work practice through students' active approaches.

Field placement as an arena for knowledge awareness
In order to address new challenges and demands, and to cope with increasing complexity, new knowledge and innovative ways of acting to improve professional performance and services are needed. Findings from this study show that the students' perspectives on research-based knowledge, combined with other forms of knowledge, offer potential for new ideas and change, particularly when knowledge and skills are applied in new ways and from new angles. In particular, Factors 2 and 3 suggest that field placement offers an opportunity to acquire innovation competence, such as opening 'cracks for new knowledge', exploring the unknown, taking part in critical dialogues and using creativity and novel thinking (Darsø, 2011). Although students in field placement have limited time to get involved in knowledge

production and innovation processes, research-oriented activities during placements appear to give them a glimpse of how research-based knowledge can offer insights into everyday challenges in professional practice.

Our study suggests a potential for enhancing students' knowledge awareness during field placement, and as Wenger (1998) argues: 'What looks promising are inventive ways of engaging students in meaningful practices of providing access to resources that enhance their participation, of opening their horizons so they can put themselves on learning trajectories they can identify with, and of involving them in actions, discussions, and reflections that make a difference to the communities that they value' (p. 10). While in field placement, students interact with clients, experienced social workers and other professionals. Being a student in field placement can make it easier to ask questions and take a learning position. Students also bring new knowledge that can stimulate important reflections and discussions among their colleagues. Higher education is encouraged to support students' ability to contribute to development and change as future professionals (Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development, 2012). The vision of social work education includes promoting social change guided by human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity (IFSW, 2014). To help achieve this, it is important that higher education triggers students' inquisitiveness so that they can seek new insights when facing challenges and dilemmas in practice. Such insights can help to address social problems considered crucial to improve practice. A close relationship between education, research and practice is important, and field placements represent an opportunity to embrace mutual endeavours.

CONCLUSION

There is a profound political emphasis on the development of knowledge-based services in social work practice (Rød, 2015). This requires social work students to develop a critical awareness regarding how various forms of knowledge may inform complex practice situations. As such, social work education plays an important role in students' professional development. Our study suggests that research-oriented activities during field placements have the potential to enhance students' knowledge awareness and critical thinking on knowledge application (see also Kroken, Ottesen, & Willumsen, 2019). In our study, the students revealed different views on the

significance of various types of knowledge without discounting the importance of user knowledge; some emphasized the importance of combining experience and research-based knowledge, whereas others revealed a higher reliance on research, in which some showed more confidence yet a critical use of research-based knowledge. It is important to acknowledge that diverse views among professionals can contribute to constructive discussions, and represent potential for new practices and moving social work forward. The students are tomorrow's practitioners, and their voices and experiences are important and provide valuable insights. Although several students expressed that the field placement activities did enhance their awareness of knowledge in their social work practice, further research is required in order to make greater use of unexploited potential for field placements, as well as to facilitate constructive knowledge-based practices in social work.

References

Andreassen, T. A., & Fossestøl, K. (2011). *NAV ved et veiskille: Organisasjonsendring som velferdsreform.* Oslo: Gyldendal.

Ask, T. A. (2014). Praktikerens ulike posisjoner. Mellom byråkrat og intellektuell? In Støkken, A. M. (Ed.), *Innovasjon og utvikling i sosialt arbeid.* (117-141). Bergen: Fagbokforlaget.

Avby, G., Nilsen, P., & Ellström, P. E. (2017). Knowledge use and learning in everyday social work practice: A study in child investigation work. *Child & Family Social Work, 22*(4), 51-61. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12227

Barton, H., Bell, K., & Bowles, W. (2005). 'Help or hindrance? Outcomes of social work student placements'. *Australian Social Work, 58*(3), 301-312. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1447-0748.2005.00222.x

Bellinger, A. (2010). Talking about (re)generation: Practice learning as a site of renewal for social work. *British Journal of Social Work, 40*(8), 2450-2466. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcq072

Bergmark, Å., & Lundström, T. (2002). Education, practice and research. Knowledge and attitudes to knowledge of Swedish social workers. *Social Work Education, 21*(3), 359-373. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615470220136920

Brown, S. (1980). *Political Subjectivity: Applications of Q methodology in political science.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Ellingsen, I. T., Størksen, I., & Stephens, P. (2010). Q methodology in social work research. *International Journal of Research Methodology, 13*(5), 395-409. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570903368286

Darsø, L. (2011). *Innovationspædagogikk – kunsten at fremelske innovationskompetence.* Fredriksberg: Samfundslitteratur.

Finch, J. (2015). 'Running with the fox and hunting with the hounds': Social work tutors' experience of managing and failing social work students in practice learning settings. *British Journal of Social Work, 45*(7), 2124-2141. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcu085

Fisher, M. (2002). The social care institute for excellence: The role of a national institute developing knowledge and practice in social care. *Social Work and Social Sciences Review, 10*(2), 6-34.

Fook, J., & Askeland, G. A. (2009). Critical reflection in social work. *European Journal of Social Work 12*(3), 287-292. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691450903100851

Gilje, N. (2017). Profesjonskunnskapens elementære former. In Mausethagen, S., & Smeby, J. C. (Eds.), *Kvalifisering til profesjonell yrkesutøvelse* (21-32). Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (2012). A place to link together and be effective in a globalized world (2012). *International Social Work, 55*(4), 454-472. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872812440587

Grimen, H. (2008). *Profesjon og kunnskap.* In Molander, A., & Terum, L. I. (Eds.), *Profesjonsstudier* (71-86)*.* Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Jørgensen, W., & Hadders, H. (2015). The significance of communities of practice: Norwegian nursing students' experience of clinical placement in Bangladesh. *Nursing Open, 2*(1), 36-46. https://doi.org/10.1002/nop2.15

IFSW (2014). *Global definition of social work.* Retrieved 8 August 2016, from https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/

Karvinen-Niinikoski, S. (2005) Research orientation and expertise in social work: Challenges for social work education. *European Journal of Social Work, 8*(3), 259–271. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691450500210756

Kojan, B. H., & Storhaug, A. S. (2015). Erfaringsbasert kunnskap og refleksiv praksis. In Ellingsen, I. T., Levin, I., Berg B., & Kleppe, L. C. (Eds.), *Sosial Arbeid – en grunnbok* (184-195). Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Kroken, K. I., Ottesen, E. S., & Willumsen, E. (2019). Læring og forskning – to sider av samme sak? In Støkken, A. M. (Ed.), *Tjenesteutvikling ved ulike former for samarbeid* (99-112)*.* Bergen: Fagbokforlaget.

Labonte-Roset, C. (2005). The European higher education area and research-orientated social work education. *European Journal of Social Work, 8*(3), 285-296. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691450500210822

Levin, I. (2004). Sosialt arbeid som spenningsfelt. In Ellingsen, I. T., Levin, I., Berg, B., & Kleppe, L. C. (Eds.), *Sosialt arbeid – en grunnbok* (36-46). Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Lyneborg, A. O., & Damgaard, M. B. (2019). Knowledge lost or gained? The changing knowledge base of Danish social work. *Nordic Social Work Research 9*(3), 206-219 https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2018.1494031*.*

McFadden, P., Taylor, B. J., Campbell, A., & McQuilkin, J. (2012). Systematically identifying relevant research: Case study on child protection social workers' resilience. *Research on Social Work Practice, 22*(6), 626-636. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731512453209

McKeown, B., & Thomas, D. (2013). *Q Methodology.* Newbury Park: Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483384412

Ministry of Education and Research (2012). *Utdanning for velferd: Samspill i praksis.* (Meld. St. nr. 13 (2011-2012). Oslo: Kunnskapsdepartementet.

Ministry of Education and Research (2019). *Forskrift om nasjonal retningslinje for soionomutdanning* (RETHOS), Retrieved 12. December 2019, from https://lovdata.no/dokument/SF/forskrift/2019-03-15-409
NESH (2016). Forskningsetiske retningslinjer for samfunnsvitenskap, humaniora, juss og teologi. Retrieved 8 August 2016, from https://www.etikkom.no/forskningsetiske-retningslinjer/Samfunnsvitenskap-jus-og-humaniora/

Noordengraaf, M. (2015). *Public management: Performance, professionalism and politics.*London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-49644-7

Nortvedt, M.W., Jamtvedt, G. J., Graverholt, B., Nordheim, L. V., & Reinar, L. M. (2012*). Jobb kunnskapsbasert! En arbeidsbok.* Oslo: Akribe.

Orme, J., & Powell, J. (2007). Building Research Capacity in Social Work: Process and Issues. *British Journal of Social Work (2007)*, 38, 989-1008. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcm122

Polanyi. M. (1966/2000). *Den tause dimensjonen: En introduksjon til taus kunnskap.* Oslo: Spartacus forlag.

Rød, P. A. (2015). Evidensbasert sosialt arbeid. In Ellingsen, I. T., Levin, I., Berg, B., & Kleppe, L. C. (Eds.), *Sosialt arbeid – en grunnbok* (196-209). Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Schmolck, P. (2002). *PQMethod Download Mirror.* Retrieved 30 August 2016, from http://www.lrz.-muenchen.de/~schmolck/qmethod/downpqx.htm

Schön, D. (1991). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action.* Aldershot: Avebury.

Shemmings, D., & Ellingsen, I. T. (2012). Using Q methodology in qualitative interviews. In Gubrium, J. A., Holstein, J. A., Marvasti, A. B., & McKinney, K.

D. (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of interview research: The complexity of the craft* (415-425). California: Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452218403.n29

Sletten, M., & Ellingsen, I. T. (2020). When standardisation becomes the lens of professional practice in child welfare services. *Child & Family Social Work*, 1-9. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12748

Stephenson, W. (1953). *The study of Behavior: Q-Technique and its methodology.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Watts, S., & Stenner, P. (2012). *Doing Q Methodological Research: Theory, Method and Interpretation.* London: Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446251911

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511803932

Zuchowski, I. (2016). Getting to know the context: The complexities of providing off-site supervision in social work practice learning. *British Journal of Social Work 46*(2), *409-426.* https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcu133