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The challenges of combining ‘knowing-that’ and ‘knowing-how’ in social work education and professional practice in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration

Utfordringer i det å kombinere ‘å vite at’ og ‘å vite hvordan’ i sosialt arbeids utdanning og profesjonell praksis i NAV

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ABSTRACT

This article presents data from a focus group study of social workers in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) and investigates how social workers perceive and experience the relevance of their education in the transition to their work in NAV. The relevance of education to practical fields became more important after the Bologna Process started in 2000. Research shows a discrepancy between what social workers learn during their professional education and the expectations they face when starting to work in welfare systems. Through analysing our data according to Ryle's concepts of ‘knowing-that’ and ‘knowing-how’ and Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning and communities of practice, we discuss the participants' experiences of the relevance of their education. Although the participants experienced their social work education as being relevant to their work in NAV, they expressed a need to learn more about *how* to apply theoretical knowledge during their education. The participants indicated work situations where they felt that their studies had insufficiently prepared them. In response to these findings, we discuss implications for social work education.

ABSTRAKT

Denne artikkelen presenterer data fra en fokusgruppestudie blant sosionomer i Arbeids- og velferdsetaten (NAV) med sikte på å utforske hvordan sosionomer oppfatter og opplever relevansen av utdanningen i overgangen til deres arbeid i NAV. Relevans av utdanning for praksisfeltet ble viktigere etter at Bolognaaprosessen startet i 2000. Forskning viser en forskjell mellom hva sosionomer lærer i løpet av sin profesjonsutdanning og forventningene de møter når de begynner å arbeide i velferdssystemet. Ved å analysere våre data i henhold til Ryles begrep ‘å vite at’ og ‘å vite hvordan’ og Lave og Wengers teori om situert læring og praksissamfunn, diskuterer vi deltakernes opplevelse av relevansen av deres utdanning. Selv om deltakerne opplevde sosionomutdanningen som relevant for sitt arbeid i NAV, uttrykte de et ønske om å ha lært mer om hvordan de skal bruke teoretisk kunnskap i løpet av utdanningen. Deltakerne pekte på arbeidssituasjoner der de opplevde at studiet hadde forberedt dem i for liten grad. I lys av disse funnene diskuterer vi implikasjoner for utdanning i sosialt arbeid.

KEYWORDS

Social work education; social worker; relevance for practice; communities of practice; transition

NØKKEORD

sosionomutdanning; sosialarbeider; relevans for praksisfeltet; praksissamfunn; overgang

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Introduction

This article explores how social workers perceive and experience the relevance and application of their social work education to their work in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV). It contributes to the literature by focusing on the transition from social work education to working life after graduation, and the need to emphasise the practical application of social work knowledge in formal education settings. Our data are based on the research project 'NAV as a Community of Practice'. This was a focus group study conducted among 27 social workers employed in eight NAV offices. It was inspired by the theories of situated learning and communities of practice, that explain the employees' process from starting as novices and newcomers to becoming fully experienced participants (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

Researchers question whether students acquire sufficient knowledge and skills to serve as professionals providing effective social welfare services. Frost et al. (2013) have addressed the relevance of professional social work education in the public welfare services. Educational institutions and working life play key roles in providing professionals with the knowledge and skills necessary for their careers (Biggs, 2011; Mausethagen & Smeby, 2016), and both are regarded as important arenas for qualification and training for the health and social work professions.

Social work education in Norway

Social workers operate in several areas of tension: between theory and practice, between assistance and control, and between the individual and society. Their aim is to help people solve, alleviate, and prevent social problems, focusing on the relationship between the individual(s) and the environment (Cornell, 2006; Payne, 2015). The international definition of social work states that social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline (IFSW & IASSW, 2014).

Eleven universities and university colleges offer social work education in Norway, constituting a practically and theoretically oriented three-year bachelor's degree programme (BA), equal to 180 European credit transfer and accumulation system (ECTS) credits. Further studies in social work at master's and doctorate levels are possible as well (Ministry of Education, 2005). Between 1995 and 2019, social work education in Norway has been regulated in the framework plan for social work education (Ministry of Education, 2005). Due to this national standard, social work education has been similar in the 11 institutions. Education focuses on the basic elements and theoretical perspectives of social work, professional ethics and roles, communication skills and interaction, including conflict resolution, and primary discipline subjects as social policy, sociology, psychology, and legal topics. Social work methods include social work with individuals and families, and with groups and community work. In the study programme, there has been a tradition to focus on social work methods with individuals and families, described as 'social casework' (Rowe, 1996).

The Ministry of Education and Research in Norway (MER, 2017) emphasises the importance of active and varied forms of teaching and learning stemming from the guidelines for higher education in Europe, initiated by the Bologna Process in 2000 (Education, 2015). Social work higher educational programmes in Norway are expected to deliver a curriculum that meets academic theoretical claims as well as competencies needed for practice in different areas of the welfare system. The curriculum must be developed in cooperation with the field of practice (MER, 2012). High quality in practice studies during social workers' bachelor's degrees were emphasised by the same Ministry in 2016. A new national guideline for social work education in Norway was implemented from 2020 onward (MER, 2019). This guideline was developed in cooperation between employees in social work education, researchers, and social workers from different areas of the practice field and by input from consulting bodies from different user organisations and social worker unions. The guideline emphasises the final learning outcomes required for the students to meet the aim of increased work-life relevance. Although the new guideline has been developed, the basic elements in the bachelor's programme are similar to those in our research.

The context for social work in NAV

NAV was established in 2006, after a merger of municipal social welfare services and government-level labour and social welfare agencies and included the development of more interdisciplinary welfare services. Locally, NAV offices, based on a partnership agreement between these two levels and the welfare organisations, were established under the NAV law (2006), regulating the partnership, the organisation, and the responsibility of NAV offices. The aim of the new organisation is to offer service users *one door* for all welfare services, providing services and benefits to those who need assistance to find and keep a job, and income security to those who are unable to work for health reasons. Work inclusion and activation work is part of the central socio-political aim and mandate for welfare legislation and for all NAV offices in Norway (Andreassen & Natland, 2020). A total of 19,000 people are employed by NAV, which manages two-thirds of the Norwegian state budget (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MLSA), 2016). The frontline workers in NAV offices have various educational backgrounds, like social work and different master studies, such as sociology and law. Traditionally, most employees in the former municipal social welfare services were educated in social work (Vågengutvalget, 2014).

Social workers are employed in both the municipal and state sections of NAV offices. They work according to laws regulating income benefits and services within the area of activation work (MLSA, 2006, 2015) and the Social Services Act in NAV (SSA) (2009). SSA serves as a last safety net in Norwegian social policy and gives social workers the mandate to use professional discretion within certain limits and regulations decided on by the municipalities. Social workers in NAV process applications for social security income, as well as perform individual casework together with clients in challenging life situations, such as economic difficulties, housing problems, marginalisation from education or work life, and health and drug problems.

Since its establishment, NAV has accentuated competence development among its employees, that has resulted in NAV's own knowledge strategy, lasting from 2013 to 2020 (NAV, 2013). One of the characteristics of this strategy is the objective and belief of building (not evaluating) internal, common, and basic skills among all employees, regardless of their formal education, before starting to work in NAV. An important part of internal training is mentorship by peers, named as shoulder-to-shoulder guidance, and NAV offers different courses for new employees. Employees must deliver according to a comprehensive system of performance measures, such as the number of clients in activation programmes and the number of clients with a follow-up plan (Andreassen, 2019). Policy documents (MER, 2017; MLSA, 2016) point out that NAV must become more involved with higher education and research organisations in Norway in developing theoretical and practical competence and knowledge-based work among their employees.

Relevance of education

Studies investigating how social workers view the relevance of their education for their work in welfare systems are scarce. Relevance is in this context understood as useful and current education. Some studies have demonstrated that social workers find their education insufficient in providing relevant knowledge and skills for the specifics of their jobs, and newly educated social workers feel unprepared and experience chaos from the beginning of their careers (Eraut et al., 2004; Larsen et al., 2017; Tham & Lynch, 2019).

When comparing social workers with other professionals, such as nurses and teachers, Heggen found that many of the nurses answered that their education (academic, practical, and relational knowledge) was necessary for their work, while less than half of the social workers expressed the same opinion. Two-thirds of the teachers said that they needed their education to do their work. Three years after graduation, social workers rated relational knowledge the highest, and academic knowledge the lowest, teachers gave academic knowledge the lowest rating, while nurses gave the highest rating to both academic and practical knowledge (Heggen, 2008, pp. 226–227).

Variations in how these professions assess the usefulness of their education for work, and how they rate the different forms of knowledge, may be due to differences in the area they attend, and in the different content of their education. Grant et al. (2016) found that recently graduated social workers felt well prepared for working life but received little managerial support in further developing their professional skills. In another study, social workers demonstrated basic skills imparted by their education and training, but they did not perceive themselves as fully fledged professionals after graduation (Jansen, 2018). These studies elucidate various perspectives in the assessment of the relevance of professional education for work practice, both for social workers as well as for nurses and teachers. More research is needed to explore social workers' own assessment of their education and its relevance to work in the new welfare organisation in Norway.

Theoretical perspectives

This article is informed by certain key distinctions, formulated as 'knowing-that' and 'knowing-how' by the philosopher Ryle (1945, 1949). Placed in a tradition of knowledge pluralism, Ryle wished to focus on the practical dimension of knowledge. While 'knowing that' is knowledge expressed as statements, 'knowing-how' pertains to the ability to perform an action. Ryle wished to rehabilitate the practical dimension of knowledge and regarded 'knowing-that' and 'knowing-how' as two independent forms of knowledge (Ryle, 1949). He argued that 'knowing-how' always requires 'knowing-that', but that one can 'know-that' without 'knowing-how'. Education and skill-training should help to exercise intellectual power, not simply the reproduction of skills. Practical knowledge and the learning of skills were not a matter of doing something blindly, but also wisely. Ryle focused on reflection, both prior to and during an action, meaning that we do not only reflect before we act, but we reflect to act (Ryle, 1949).

Schön's (1983) concept of *reflection-in-action* explains the reflections that occur during action, when knowledge, decisions, and problem solving often occur. The concept of 'tacit knowledge' expresses that 'knowing in practice' can become more implicitly spontaneous and automatic when work tasks are repeated over time. *Reflection-on-action* is what occurs after action, often during supervision, and through this process professionals can develop their knowledge and become capable of articulating previously tacit knowledge (Schön, 1983).

Wenger's (1998) theories of communities of practice can enlighten the challenges of the transfer of 'knowing-that' to 'knowing-how'. The transfer of knowledge, in this case from university college to professional practice, and from being a student to becoming an employee, implies a transition from a community of learning to a community of practice. In this process, the meaning of professional knowledge is challenged and negotiated when newcomers meet participants in a new organisation. Theories and methods learned in school are expected to be applied in a new and different setting, and from abstract thinking to be concretised and negotiated according to the needs in practice. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), learning is situated, and the meaning of knowledge developed among participants in one place needs to be negotiated where people live, are members and interact, and when applied in a new context.

Method

In this article, we present data from the research project 'NAV as a Community of Practice' by focusing on the participants' evaluation of their own social work education and its relevance for NAV. The choice of the methodological approach was guided by situated learning theory and communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). We wished to facilitate the exchange of experiences in a collegial context and chose focus group interviews as an appropriate method (Krueger, 2014). Focus groups produce collective opinions and, at the same time, elucidate the context where opinions are formed (Halvorsen, 2008).

Some criticism concerning the use of focus groups is that group dynamics may influence data collection. This dynamic can promote discussion among the group members but might also prevent open discussion if some participants do not feel safe enough to present their views (Halvorsen, 2008). In this project, we considered the construction of the group dynamic as an advantage, as it was precisely the collective voice that we wanted to bring out in the discussion. The choice of theoretical perspectives guided the interviews as well as the analysis of empirical data to widen this field of research. This understanding of the role of theory in research investigation implies that theory serves as a kind of 'can opener' to empirical material, that is, a midpoint between purely theory-oriented and purely data-oriented research and analytical design (Høyer, 2012).

The target group consisted of social workers with up to five years of work experience after graduation. NAV offices included in the study were strategically chosen, and subsequently, offices with different organisational models, sizes, and staff levels in the defined target group, as well as in urban and rural districts, were represented. The study was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). NAV office managers approved the study, addressed the defined target group among their staff, and forwarded their email addresses. The research leader then provided sample participants with a letter of invitation and a consent form to be signed. Only a few declined to participate in the study.

The interview guide for the focus groups included the following main topics: starting the job, job tasks and working methods, the benefits and application of social work education, how their skills were received by internal and external collaboration partners, the training provided to new staff members, and the opportunities for professional updating and development. Input for the interview guide was provided by two social workers who were employed by NAV but did not participate in the study.

At the end of 2015, a total of seven focus group interviews were conducted with 27 social workers (25 women and 2 men), representing NAV offices in five districts in the city of Bergen and three nearby rural municipalities. To ensure sufficient participation, we also included nine social workers with more than five years of work experience after graduation. Initially, we planned for five or six participants in each focus group. However, some participants could not participate due to illness or work tasks. In the focus groups, there were four groups with three participants, one with four participants, one with five participants, and one with seven participants. The focus groups were numbered 1–7, and to secure anonymity in the transcripts, each participant was given a number that they presented when they started to speak, e.g. '1.6' = group number 1, participant number 6.

The interviews were arranged in different offices and lasted approximately two hours each. The project leader acted as the moderator for all interviews, and the two co-authors participated in half of them. The interviews were recorded using an audio device, and subsequently transcribed.

Conducting interviews about events that, for some participants, occurred some years previously, may have involved sources of uncertainty. One methodological problem associated with focus group interviews is that the group participants may influence each other, causing the discussion to take a specific direction. By conducting seven focus group interviews, we wanted to ensure a certain breadth and variety of the participants' experiences and opinions. (Table 1).

When analysing qualitative data, one common method is to categorise data into descriptive and thematic categories (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). To strengthen credibility and unanimity, the three researchers in this study were involved in all stages of the analysis process (Creswell, 2006). First, the three researchers read seven interviews and individually completed initial descriptive coding. Then, they met and discussed each other's initial coding, and together identified 15 preliminary themes, summarised under the following categories: (1) learning methods in education, (2) the sense of and use of education in NAV, and (3) what they missed in their education for their work in NAV.

In a second meeting, the 15 preliminary themes were further discussed, and through a process of categorising, five categories emerged: (1) key insights from social work education and what they

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants in the study (Larsen et al., 2017, p. 35).

- Age ranges from 23 to 58 years. Average age of 34.4 years.
- 25 women and 2 men.
- 18 permanent employees, 9 temporary employees.
- 18 graduated between 2010 and 2015.
- 3 graduated between 2005 and 2009.
- 6 graduated before 2004.
- 12 started working in NAV between 2010 and 2013.
- 9 started working in NAV between 2014 and 2015.
- 6 had been working in the previous organisations and continued their career when it became NAV.

missed, (2) learning in education versus learning in practice, (3) learning methods in education, (4) characteristics of education, and (5) what kind of tasks social workers perform in NAV.

Through further analysis of the five categories, three analytical categories were agreed upon: (1) a complex and skill-intensive area of the work, (2) the characteristics and relevance of the education, and (3) much 'that' and less 'how' in social work education.

Limitations

This was a focus group study with seven small focus groups and a limited number of participants, represented by eight NAV offices in Bergen and three rural municipalities around the city, all from the same county. While Bergen is the second largest city in Norway, rural municipalities were also represented in this study. Thus, as Norway consists of both small rural municipalities and cities, we considered the study to reflect Norway's demographic landscape. The small number of men in the sample indicated that there were few male social workers in our target group.

Findings

The research question leading our presentation of the findings in this study was how social workers in NAV perceived and experienced the relevance of their social work education for their work in this context.

NAV – a complex and skill-intensive area of work

Overall, the participants expressed that their work in NAV offices was diverse and complex in terms of the types and scope of the job content that included reception of new clients, provision of information, activation work, referrals to addiction therapy, and securing income and social insurance benefits. One participant described the span of the NAV's field of activity as follows:

Today, I work mostly with refugees, but also occasionally with adolescents. The work with refugees is extremely diverse ... It includes everything from furnishing an apartment for the refugees when they arrive to the coordination of their introduction programme, arranging for networks, establishing contact with refugee buddies, helping them find a dentist, and connecting them with all other public agencies and the social benefits decisions. As a youth contact, I help chair a group of young jobseekers once a week. (6.2)

Some NAV offices were responsible for following up on substance abusers living at home, often referred to as residential follow-up, as described by this participant:

Here we have people with serious substance abuse issues and challenges when it comes to housing, and this involves practical guidance as to how they can keep their apartment or find a place to live. We are involved in cases related to coercive hospitalisation in relation to drug abuse. (3.4)

As the participants tended to describe above, a variety of job tasks in NAV required different sets of skills and knowledge, and many of them saw this as both demanding and inspiring in their daily work. When reflecting on the scope of work, some mentioned the focus on activation work in NAV:

At some point when work focus came in NAV, I remember being a little provoked because I thought that there are so many groups that are so far away from work, and that we should have that focus so intensely, it felt like an unreasonable demand to those who are very ill. But work can be socialising, and many come from marginal backgrounds ... Many of them could benefit greatly being employed, but we need workplaces for those with less work capacity. (7.2)

Many of the participants expressed awareness of the socio-political demands of activation in NAV. At the same time, they did not accept this demand in all situations and emphasised what was appropriate when regarding the clients' needs in the specific situation. They considered the focus on activation as positive for some of their clients, while the same demand of going to work as too hard for others, due to their difficult life situations. Hence, they simultaneously expressed criticism toward the activation policy and expressed a need for a holistic view of the clients' life situation.

The characteristics and relevance of social work education for work in NAV

Most of the participants perceived their bachelor's degree in social work as covering numerous topics, providing them with a broad range of knowledge and insight about different theories, methods, and areas of work, as expressed by this participant:

We were taught many different things, so we never became really good at anything but learned a little about everything. I cannot say I'm an expert at anything in particular, but I work with a lot of different issues. It was good that at least we were given an introduction. (2.6)

Participant's perception of this broad knowledge base for their work in NAV appeared to differ. Some experienced it as an advantage, and others would have liked to learn more about specific topics and methods necessary for their work in NAV.

Another participant described the relevance of the study programme in her daily work in NAV as follows:

I feel I can use my education and training to a great extent. It is not like I walk around thinking of all kinds of theories and methods, but it's there, and I feel it as I go along. You are in a situation or a conversation, and then it comes sort of automatically ... So I absolutely feel that my education and training are relevant. (1.1)

When discussing the relevance of social work education for their work in NAV, the participants expressed a general perception of how their education and training were sufficient in various job situations, without specifying the concrete knowledge and skills applied in their work. However, when encouraged by the facilitator to describe what they saw as the most important content of their social work education, communication skills were mentioned most, with reference to Lawrence Shulman's model for the interaction skills of helping (Shulman, 2015). Many social work programmes in Norway train their students to work with their clients' emotions and problems, aligned with Shulman's communication skills. These skills are linked to different stages of the helping process, from preparation to completion. This model was referred to as part of the integrated knowledge applied in our participants' conversations with clients:

Yes, we use Shulman. And in every conversation, we follow the book consistently. But I don't walk around thinking, 'Now I have to use Shulman'. It becomes a part of how I work. (3.3)

The participants largely emphasised the importance of a holistic approach with clients, and all the factors that affected the specific person to be considered, including both their public and private environment.

Much 'that' and less 'how' in social work education

The participants mentioned the need for more focus on NAV in the educational programme in particular, its organisation, scope, and methods, and how the job content and roles vary between departments. During their BA programmes in social work, the participants would have liked to have learnt more about a wider scope in certain disciplines and courses, such as law: 'I would have liked more instruction in legal matters because I notice that interpreting the legal basis is a major part of the job' (6.2). This quote demonstrates that learning about legislation involves not only knowing about specific laws, but also learning how to interpret the law in their daily work in NAV. In the data analysis, this appeared to feature prominently in many of the focus group interviews and was a view shared by many participants. They called not only for more knowledge about specific academic topics, such as psychology, but also emphasised the need for learning about *how* more theoretical textbook knowledge could be applied in NAV. Learning about diagnoses alone was insufficient; they also needed to learn how to relate to persons with a specific diagnosis seeking help from NAV:

I still miss having a broad and deep knowledge about psychiatric diseases from a social welfare perspective. It should not be just learning the diagnostic terminology, ICD10, by rote. I was in a situation with a person who had psychotic traits, and I thought, 'How can I talk to her?' Then I Googled it and found, 'Speak to her as you would to a normal person.' Why didn't anybody tell me that in psychology class? I feel that this was an omission. (1.1)

Further, they wished for more skills in crisis management and in encountering people in crisis, as well as more knowledge about how to act when facing threats and violence on the job. The focus group participants also expressed that more *learning how* was added to the professional training during their practice placement. However, some of the participants felt that they gained little experience as students in practice placements, mainly because of the few opportunities to work independently.

Some reported a significant difference between education and practice, and one expressed: 'I had an expectation when I was educated that I would be able to work in NAV. But that was not entirely true. The studies go into things quite thoroughly, but it is impossible to know how this will be in practice when you work' (5.4).

Many of the participants also indicated that learning how to handle diversity in NAV must be acquired in the job context and through experience:

The studies are so general, and you cannot learn what to do when you need to say 'No' to social benefits. There are so many examples that you need to learn by doing it ... There are many things I would like to have been better prepared for. (2.5)

Some of the participants had attended different internal introductory courses in NAV, and experienced these as useful, as well as the shoulder-to-shoulder training from other colleagues. However, they felt it was their own responsibility to find the time to attend introductory courses.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate how social workers perceived and experienced the relevance of their social work education for their work in NAV. As demonstrated, during their BA studies in social work, they wished to learn more about how to apply their theoretical knowledge, possibly due to their lack of understanding of the application of relevant theoretical and practical skills in the transition from studies to work. Difficulties facing this transition have also been expressed in other studies among social workers, nurses, and teachers (Heggen, 2008; Skår, 2010; Tham & Lynch, 2019). Here, we discuss some important aspects related to this transition as they occurred in our data.

The transition from one community of practice to another

Examining our data in the light of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and Wenger's theory on communities of practice (1998), our participants referred to knowledge achieved and applied in two

different communities: the community of education and the community of practice. In the community of education, the meaning of theories can be communicated by tasks and exams or by roleplays used as an instrument where theory is transferred to action through practical understanding and skill training. As professional social workers in the community of practice in NAV they experienced their knowledge to be negotiated among colleagues in a setting where abstract theories were concretised in their meetings with clients and by special procedures. This transition implied a new social learning situation in which each participant entered as an individual, with their own background, and had to find their own way to become a full member of the new community of practice.

The very different demands and complex social problems they had to deal with could be overwhelming and quite different from an educational situation. As other studies (Larsen et al., 2017; Terum & Heggen, 2016; Tham & Lynch, 2019) have indicated, social work education is facing the challenge of preparing students for the transition from education to work, among other ways to handle chaos and unforeseen problems. Our participants indicated that social work educational programmes had succeeded to a greater or lesser extent. On the one hand, the participants called for a learning design that could help them provide more 'knowing-how' (Ryle, 1949) during their social work studies. On the other hand, many of them also stated that 'knowing-how' could only be learned after starting to work in NAV, having experienced the fact that both specific and contextual job tasks demanded knowledge that could not have been previously acquired. This duality, or ambivalence, in assessing the relevance of their education to their work in NAV, may have been rooted differently. Our interpretation is that this could have been related to the content of their education, their own lack of ability to translate theoretical and practical knowledge from their education to practice at work, or how NAV received and made use of their social work education, or a mixture of these aspects. These empirical questions need to be further addressed in Norway.

As expressed by the study participants, the concrete routines and procedures in NAV must be learned after they start working there. Learning about such routines and procedures is not included in the framework plan for the social work BA programme. Due to changes in the ways of working in NAV and other practice fields, it would be difficult to include this in detail in the social work curriculum. However, critical reflection on how the implementation of the social policy framework, through certain procedures and regulations in NAV, affects both service users and social workers might, in our view, be introduced as part of their social work education.

The possibility and ability for critical reflections

Our participants rarely referred to topics from the social sciences as relevant subjects for their work in NAV, despite these being key subjects in social work education. Nor did they reflect critically upon the reason for this during the focus group interviews, possibly due to a lack of reflection about the profile of their competence after graduating. An assessment of the relevance of professional education may be based on the workplace characteristics and job content. Work in NAV is often characterised by casework and work with individual service users, as well as related partners of collaboration, and is consistent with seeing the 'person-in-situation' as a key feature of social work as a discipline and a profession (Cornell, 2006; Payne, 2015). This may be why the study participants highlighted individually oriented educational topics, such as communication theory, psychology, and law, and saw them as especially useful in their encounters with individual clients. Social science, as social policy, and organisation theory, may also be seen as part of their underlying but tacit knowledge base that is applied when they assist and guide their clients and navigate in this complex welfare policy area.

As shown in the findings, some of the participants expressed a critical reflection concerning their task and role as social workers in the implementation of the activation policy in NAV by emphasising the importance of seeing their clients 'need for help and ability to work regardless of the institutional demands of activation work. Critical reflection is important for professional growth (Fook & Gardner, 2007), and one of the future challenges for social work education is, according to Lorenz (2017), to

enable students to critically reflect on the content of their education, as well as the context and mandate of their workplaces after being employed as social workers. The discipline of social work may thus play an important role in 'making a critical difference' (Lorenz, 2017, p. 319). Social work education also needs to ensure that students can cope with dilemmas and uncertainties that may arise both during and after their formal education (Tham & Lynch, 2020; Terum & Heggen, 2016). This is a prerequisite for social workers to reflect on this in their work after graduation.

The relevance of social work education for practice

Our participants reported a significant difference between what they had learned during their studies, and what they needed for practical competence working in NAV. They called for teaching to include more realistic cases and the involvement of staff from the practice field, as also highlighted by Tham and Lynch (2019). In our opinion, social work education cannot provide an exhaustive list of examples or fully prepare the students for all the situations they will face at work. In our view, there seems to be a need for social work education to facilitate a student-centred and active learning design, to guide the students in their process of moving from 'knowing-that' to 'knowing-how'.

From this perspective, the primary scope of social work education will be to provide students with an appropriate platform for lifelong learning in both their formal education and professional careers in NAV, as well as other parts of social work. The focus on lifelong learning in Norway highlights the need for more flexibility in the education system, to enable further education and work (MER, 2019). At the same time, a bachelor's degree in social work needs to meet the requirements of the educational system to enable students to participate in further higher education, both on the level of master's and PhD studies.

Conclusion

The transition from education to social work practice seems to be challenging. In Norway, there is currently a strong policy pointing towards tighter links and interactions between education and working life, and a need for closer collaboration among higher education and the field of practice. To avoid the knowledge gap when graduates start their work lives is probably utopia. Knowledge achieved in one situation will always need to be translated and concretised among participants in a new context. The university must prepare and train students to manage unexpected challenges and chaos, and how to reflect critically.

Further research needs to address the interplay between social work education and social work practice, and how students can be better prepared to apply theoretical knowledge (cf. 'knowing-that') both during their studies and in their work life. There is also a need for further research on the relevance of education, and how various actors in the educational and practical fields perceive it in empirical terms.

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