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Student Perspectives on Application of Theory to Practice in Field Practicums

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Anne M. Scaggs

MSW, University of Texas at Arlington, 2001

BSW, University of North Texas, 1990

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

The field practicum is designed to offer students the opportunity to integrate knowledge and practice prior to graduation; however, students continue to lack the ability to connect theory to practice within the field practicum. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives of social work students regarding the application of theory to practice within the field practicum. The conceptual framework included concepts of empowerment, empowerment theory, and social constructivism. The research question addressed how social work students at a local university described the issues related to connecting theory to practice within the field practicum. Data collection involved interviews with 6 social work practicum students, observations, and document analysis. Data were coded and analyzed to identify 4 themes: learned theories, concerns, theory to practice, and student beliefs related to theory and practice. Findings confirmed students' inability to connect theory to practice. Findings were used to develop a project incorporating simulated learning environments in social work curricula to increase the connection of theory to practice. Findings may be used to enhance students' ability to integrate theory into practice, which may strengthen the profession of social work through improved service delivery at local, state, national, and global levels.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my parents, Edward and Linda Bleess; my husband, Steve; and my children and grandchildren. My father and my husband have been the most influential men in my life. Although they went about it in different ways, they both provided unconditional love and support to me. My mother was the first person to tell me I had the ability to make my own dreams come true. My children and grandchildren have provided inspiration to be the very best woman I can be in every aspect of my life. Mom, I hope I have made you proud. Dad, how I wish you were here to celebrate this moment with me. Steve, thank you for supporting my dreams. Justin, Katie, Ashton, Rowan, Tate, Abigail, and Austin, thank you for giving my hopes, dreams, and reality so much meaning! I love you all.

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Section 1: The Problem

The Local Problem

Social work is considered the profession in which practitioners advocate for the poor, impoverished, and oppressed. Social workers provide services to people ranging in age from infants to the elderly crossing all racial, ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic lines (Hepworth & Larsen, 2016). The goal of social work education is to prepare students to perform as practitioners. The field practicum is a significant feature of social work education. However, there continues to be a lack of integration between theory and practice in the field practicum (Larrison & Korr, 2013; Lee & Fortune, 2013a, 2013b; Molina, Molina-Moore, Smith, & Pratt, 2018; Reupert, 2009; Sieminski & Seden, 2011; Singh, 2010; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010; Williamson & Chang, 2009).

Researchers offered several explanations for the lack of connection between theory and practice. Singh (2010) found fault with educators who have failed to teach social work's core concepts. Larrison and Korr (2013) and Adams, Matto, and LeCroy (2009) argued that issues pertaining to the integrative feature of social work education provide a more compelling explanation for the problem. Lee and Fortune (2013b) offered another explanation that the field practicum is overwhelming for students. Regardless of the explanation, effective practitioners need to be able to integrate and apply core competencies of social work within the field (Cleak, Roulston, & Vreugdenhil, 2016; Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2008; Larrison & Korr, 2013; Lee & Fortune, 2013b; Singh, 2010; Wayne et al., 2010).

Researchers examining strategies to bridge the connection of theory to practice has identified some viable options within the classroom and field practicum. Collaborative learning activities, student use of reflection, and other group activities completed in the classroom and the field practicum provided the strongest connections between theory and practice (Askheim, Beresford, & Heule, 2017; Lee & Fortune, 2013b; Sieminski & Seden, 2011; Sung-Chan & Yuen-Tsang, 2008). However, the main focus of the research has been related to activities completed by students in an effort to impact teaching and learning in social work education. There are very few studies looking solely at the students' beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives related to the issue of the application of theory to practice while in the field practicum. Understanding this issue from the student perspective will provide new insight into the problem and may result in the development of teaching and learning strategies designed to meet student needs and improve social work education as well as the development of professional social workers.

Three universities within a 40-mile radius of each other have accredited social work programs. Prior to a review of literature and in an effort to increase awareness of current issues in social work education, I made contact with faculty at two of these universities. During the conversations, the faculty members identified concerns related to student inability to connect social work theories to practice in the field practicum (personal communication, December 15, 2013). The faculty reported that although progress had been made in students' abilities to integrate theory into practice, there continues to be a disconnect on the students' part when it comes to applying theory to practice. The university where the current study was conducted graduates approximately

60 students a year from the social work program; most of those students experience the disconnect (faculty, personal communication, September 15, 2014).

At a meeting with local counselors and social workers, I addressed the topic of student interns. The social work field practicum supervisors discussed their concerns related to student application of knowledge to practice in the field practicum (personal communication, April, 18, 2014). One field practicum supervisor indicated that every student she has supervised required assistance with connecting theory to practice (personal communication, September 15, 2014). Another placement supervisor reported that all of the interns she worked with had issues connecting theory to practice in differing degrees (personal communication, September 12, 2014). The director of social work for a local school district shared that she has been supervising student interns for more than 20 years and more than 90% of her interns have had issues connecting theory to practice within the practicum (personal communication, September 12, 2014).

There are 54 universities in the study site area with accredited social work programs, making this issue relevant on the state level (CSWE, 2015). Although multiple teaching and learning strategies have been implemented and studied to correct the issue, the problem remains; the problem also exists in a local community, impacting the development of social work practitioners. Hepworth and Larsen (2016) noted that practitioners need knowledge and practice skills to improve the social functioning of clients. Knowledge of and skills in practice vary according to the client base. Students require exposure to the different levels and types of social work practice (CSWE, 2015). There are three levels of practice: micro, mezzo, and macro. Micro level practice is also

known as direct or clinical practice because services are delivered directly to clients (Hepworth & Larsen, 2016). Mezzo and macro levels of practice are referred to as indirect practice because they generally involve minimum contact with the clients (Hepworth & Larsen, 2016). Students showing an inability to connect theory to practice in the field practicum may not have enough time to experience exposure to the different levels of social work practice (Adams et al., 2009). However, a student with the ability to integrate theory and practice in the field practicum will have time to develop stronger practice skills and will be exposed to more practice situations (Adams et al., 2009). Students may also take social work courses online, which means they can complete their education from anywhere in the world, and social work services are now being provided online, which increases the reach of the practitioner. This reinforces the need to integrate theory and practice as a way to support the profession and enhance client services. Graduating social work students who are better prepared for the workforce impact communities on a local, national, and global level.

Research has indicated the lack of integration between theory and practice in social work education. The issue has been studied extensively for many years on a national and international level (Askheim et al., 2017; Bogo, Lee, McKee, Ramjattan, & Baird, 2017; Heule, Knutagard, & Kristiansen, 2017; Larrison & Korr, 2013; Lee & Fortune, 2013a, 2013b; Molina et al., 2018; Reupert, 2009; Sieminski & Seden, 2011; Singh, 2010; Stone, 2016; Wayne et al., 2010; Williamson & Chang, 2009). Singh (2010) shared that despite field training being the backbone of social work education, educators have failed in teaching the core concepts resulting in a lack of integration between theory

and practice. Stone (2016) observed that despite the responsibility placed on practicum field instructors to make recommendations and assess students' abilities and competencies, there has been little research conducted on how field instructors perceive student competence. Larrison and Korr (2013) also found inconsistency in the integrative feature of practice knowledge within social work education. Given that field experience is essential in the integration of theory and practice, it is necessary to broaden the concept of signature pedagogy to strengthen the effectiveness of social work education (Larrison & Korr, 2013). Adams et al. (2009) referred to the disconcerting gap in knowledge transfer as a long-term issue. Adams et al. suggested that good social work education should be grounded in theory and practice skills combined with in-depth training in specific intervention approaches. Vayda and Bogo (1991) began examining and developing teaching models to address the discontinuity between theory and practice during field instruction in 1987.

Lee and Fortune (2013b) explained that there are many reasons students experience difficulty integrating theory and practice. Students may be overwhelmed with the field experience or may experience a disruption when moving from the classroom into their practicum. Reupert (2009) identified the inability to connect theory to practice as a gap between insight and practice and suggested that the theories or theory a student chooses and the way in which those theories are integrated into practice is related to the student's sense of self. Reupert examined the teaching implications of multiple self-awareness activities rarely needed to assist students in becoming aware of the connection

between personal values, beliefs, and experiences and the interaction of those elements within a professional role.

During a review of the literature, I discovered a consistent gap in students' ability to connect theory to practice. Reupert (2009) suggested that an increase in self-awareness would assist in reducing the gap. Sieminski and Seden (2011) confirmed that the need to improve the connection between theory and practice has been a concern of social work educators outside of the United States, including the United Kingdom and other countries, for many years. Sieminski and Seden gathered information from tutors who reported on methods found to be helpful in supporting student ability to connect theory to practice. Findings supported a staged approach to learning (scaffolding) and connecting or supporting previous knowledge as a way to strengthen the application of theory to practice (Sieminski & Seden, 2011). Molina et al. (2018) suggested a way to bridge the gap between theory and practice could be through the use of an innovative learning contract designed to help the student and designated field instructor integrate theories into practice as well as make immediate connections between agency duties and behaviors related to agency functions. Sung-Chan and Yuen-Tsang (2008) reported that social work educators have become increasingly concerned with ways to address the widening gap in student ability to connect theory to practice. Their study took place in China and addressed action research as a viable approach to impact the theory-to-practice gap. Sung-Chan and Yuen-Tsang conducted an action experiment using reciprocal reflection to determine the potential impact on student learning and integration of theory and practice. Sung-Chan and Yuen-Tsang reported that the experiment was successful in

supporting student learning, improving practice, and developing student ability to connect theory to practice. Finally, Wayne et al. (2010) suggested that the lack of balance between theoretical knowledge and practical application is due to student education, field instructor knowledge, and the variety of social work settings available for field practicum. The lack of connection between theory and practice in the field practicum was also well documented at the local universities involved in this study, as well as at universities across the United States and in other countries.

Rationale

Social work education impacts the profession's future through contributions to knowledge, education of proficient professionals, and leadership in the field of social work (CSWE, 2015). Two local universities have social work programs with field practicums as a requirement for graduation. Both universities have indicated students continue to have difficulty connecting the theories learned in previous courses to practice within the field practicum (faculty, personal communication, December 15, 2013). One educator indicated most students have a disconnect between theory and practice. This becomes evident in conversations with field instructors and when the students meet for discussion in their weekly seminar course (faculty, personal communication, Sept. 15, 2014). In addition to faculty concerns, several field practicum supervisors have expressed similar concerns with students' ability to transfer knowledge into practice (faculty, personal communication, April, 18, 2014). Two field instructors indicated every student they supervised required assistance in connecting theory to practice. The need becomes apparent during the weekly supervision meetings when the field instructors address

theories used while in the practicum. Students either cannot identify the theory used or are unable to determine the best way to support client needs (faculty, personal communication, Sept. 20, 2014). Statements made by the university faculty and field practicum supervisors support research that indicated students' inability to connect theory to practice is an issue in social work education (Larrison & Korr, 2013; Lee & Fortune, 2013a, 2013b; Molina et al., 2018; Reupert, 2009; Sieminski & Seden, 2011; Singh, 2010; Wayne et al., 2010; Williamson & Chang, 2009).

I was interested in studying the theory-to-practice gap issue because it has been a longstanding issue in social work education despite being examined for nearly 30 years. Examination of this issue from the students' perspective had not been done, and I was interested in learning what students had to say about the theory-to-practice gap. The purpose of this study was to learn the beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives of social work students in the field practicum as they relate to the application of theory to practice within the field practicum experience. Findings may be used to increase learning for social work students, to support the connection of theory to practice in the field practicum, and to improve the field practicum experience and social work education overall.

Definition of Terms

Core competencies: The nine measurable practice behaviors in social work education, including knowledge, values, and skills (CSWE, 2015).

Empowerment: A process in communities or organizations that involves active participation, critical reflection, awareness, understanding, and access to and control over decisions and resources (Perkins, 2010).

Field practicum: An active learning process in an agency or social work setting allowing students to observe and experience situations with clients under the supervision of a licensed professional social worker (Lee & Fortune, 2013a).

Seminar: A course that is partnered with a field practicum allowing students to interact with faculty and each other regarding their experiences in the field (CSWE, 2015).

Signature pedagogy: The characteristic forms of teaching and learning within a specific profession (Shulman, 2005).

Social constructivism: A learning theory that characterizes the building of knowledge and understanding gained through experience and social interaction with others (Sthapornnanon, Sakulbumrungsil, Theeraroungchaisri, & Watcharadamrongkun, 2009).

Significance of the Study

The practice of social work involves knowledge of human development and behavior; social, economic, and cultural factors; and the interaction of these factors. Social work practice also includes the application and integration of social work values, skills, and concepts with individuals, families, groups, and communities (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2018). The ongoing issue regarding theory and practice is significant because it has the potential to impact local communities as well as social work practice on a global level. Social work students with a strong ability to connect theory and practice become practitioners who possess the ability to understand bureaucratic systems, human behavior, economic and political structures, and the impact

on individuals and marginalized populations (Zastrow, 2013). Those practitioners will be better prepared to develop interventions for a wide variety of clients impacting general well-being promoting social justice (Hepworth & Larsen, 2016; Vayda & Bogo, 1991). Cleak et al. (2016) reported an increased need for well-trained and well-skilled social work practitioners because of increasingly complex client issues. Gursansky and Le Sueur (2012) asserted that there is a need for highly qualified and skilled practitioners with the ability to apply knowledge to effective practice. Gursansky and Le Sueur reviewed field education courses in Australia and developed a curriculum for field education. Gursansky and Le Sueur stated that highly skilled practitioners will be able to meet the ever-changing needs of their client populations through the application of research-based knowledge designed for outcome-based practice. Similarly, Wrenn and Wrenn (2009) noted that it is imperative for students to be able to integrate theory and practice. Social workers who are unable to transfer the social work core competences, values, and knowledge into practice might engage in unethical practice and decision-making (Wrenn, 2009). Social work practitioners are called on to act with integrity and seek social and economic justice (CSWE, 2015; Wayne et al., 2010).

Studying this issue provided both local universities with information related to how students view the issue. This information could impact curriculum delivery from the introductory social work course through the advanced social work courses. The faculty could use the findings to develop new teaching and learning strategies to enhance learning outcomes. Improved learning outcomes impact social work in two ways. First, a rigorous social work program graduating students with an improved ability to connect

theory to practice can increase the reputation of the institution and the social work program, which may increase enrollment. Second, improved learning outcomes will result in social work practitioners having a better understanding of the core competencies, values, and skills required to function as professional social workers (Hepworth & Larson, 2016). By graduating students with a better understanding of how to connect theory to practice, the profession of social work will be strengthened (Vayda & Bogo, 1991). This may lead to improved client services as stronger practitioners have the ability to provide better services to clients, which impacts social services locally, nationally, and globally (Hepworth & Larson, 2016).

The purpose of social work is to promote or restore positive or beneficial interactions between individuals and society to improve the quality of life for everyone (Hepworth & Larsen, 2016). A social worker with a comprehensive understanding of empowerment, which is one of the core competencies, can organize activities for groups and organizations to develop the members' abilities to use their voices at city, state, and national levels. This could translate to block and neighborhood improvement associations, grassroots organizations, and faith-based organizations working to effect change (Perkins, 2010). Even if the change is occurring on a small scale, success tends to be a motivator for continued action (Zastrow, 2013). Empowerment and additional core concepts in social work education are central to the work of improving lives (CSWE, 2015).

The connection between social work, social work education, and social change is well documented. Hyslop (2012) noted that social work is concerned with social justice

and social change, as are social work theory and education. Hyslop's review of the evolution of social work supported the need for social workers to remain engaged while empowering clients to perpetuate social change. Mizrahi and Dodd (2013) recognized social work's dual focus on individual and system change as well as the expectation for practitioners to engage in social change activities. Mizrahi and Dodd analyzed master's level social work students' perspectives on social activism and found that most students understood and subscribed to social activism as a way to promote social change. The students believed their education included opportunities to experience social activism as well as justification for social activism and change (Mizrahi & Dodd, 2013). In March 2012, the International Federation of Social Workers, the International Association of Schools of Social Work, and the International Council on Social Welfare presented the global agenda for social work and social development calling for a commitment to action recognizing the connection between social work and social change. The global agenda also called for the organizations involved with the agenda to support, influence, and promote initiatives aimed at achieving social and economic change at local, community, and global levels ("The Global Agenda for Social Work," 2012). Reisch and Jani (2012) asserted that social work promotes social change, empowerment, and liberation. Reisch and Jani suggested that social work is unique among organized professions because practitioners believe in clients' ability to create their own destiny. Crawford (2012) noted social workers are social change agents, and social work programs could learn from the United States. Zastrow (2013) emphasized social workers are instrumental in advocating for change in social policies and environmental reform. Wehbi and Straka (2011) used

reflection as a way to engage their social work students in considering barriers that can impede social change. The participatory reflection activities supported the connection of theory to practice, outlined internal and external barriers to engaging in social change, and identified factors designed to help the students overcome the barriers (Wehbi & Straka, 2011). The activity used in the classroom resulted in students' increased knowledge and understanding, opportunities to develop individual models for social justice work, and a stronger connection with social change (Wehbi & Straka, 2011). As a way to support the connection between social work and social change, social work educators developed a Social Action Day to support curriculum and model advocacy and ethical responsibility for social action to generate social change (Lane et al., 2012). The development of strong social workers supports the well-being of individuals and communities through positive social change (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010).

Research Question

The research problem pertains to the predominant issue in social work education, which is students' inability to connect theory to practice within the field practicum setting. The purpose of this study was to provide new insight into the problem. In alignment with the research problem and purpose, the following research question was used to guide the study: How do social work students at a local university describe the issues related to the connection of theory to practice within the field practicum? The research question is used to focus the study and to keep the researcher's mind open to what will emerge from the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Review of the Literature

Conceptual Framework

The study was guided by the conceptual framework of the concepts of

empowerment, empowerment theory, and social constructivism. The concept of

empowerment has grown in acceptance as a best practice in social work (Boehm &

Staples, 2002). Empowerment has been defined as a process involving active

participation, critical reflection, awareness, and understanding within communities or

organizations (Perkins, 2010). Kalso (2016) described empowerment as people

experiencing a sense of control and independence. As a theory, empowerment links

mental health to collective help and encourages thought as it relates to health versus

illness, strengths versus needs, and competence versus inadequacy (Perkins &

Zimmerman, 1995). The strengths versus needs and competence versus inadequacy

components tie empowerment theory to the pervasive issue in social work education. The

purpose of the field practicum in social work education is to provide social work students

the opportunity to use theories in a practice situation under the supervision of licensed

social workers. Empowerment theory supported the study through the strengths versus

needs concept, which is taught in social work education, and by modeling empowerment

for the students, thereby creating the opportunity for students to connect theory to

practice by expressing their views on the topic. Schulze (2012) identified the importance

of empowerment as it relates to supervision of students.The students may have also

experienced the feeling of empowerment while participating in the study and sharing

their thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions about their inability to connect theory to practice

in the field practicum. Students' exposure to empowerment and empowerment theory strengthens their personal knowledge and increases their levels of competence (Boehm & Staples, 2002; Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; CSWE, 2008; Kalso, 2016; Wendt & Seymour, 2010; Whiteside, Tsey, & Cadet-James, 2011).

I also used the theory of social constructivism as a framework for the study. The concept of cognitive constructivism evolved from the work of Piaget, who described learning as an active process in which students construct new ideas based on past or current knowledge (Brandon & All, 2010). As a learning theory, constructivism focuses on students rather than educators. Social constructivism suggests optimal student learning occurs when students actively develop their understanding through interaction with other students (Sthapornnanon et al., 2009). Fire and Casstevens (2013) suggested that when students create their meaning and knowledge from experience, then experience is meaning and students have the possibility to obtain different meanings from every experience. Keaton and Bodie (2011) noted that communication alters how things are perceived and broadens the range of potential meanings. The incorporation of knowledge during social interaction with peers connects social constructivism to the pervasive issue in social work education. Social work curricula begin with introductory courses and progress to advanced concepts and practice courses. Each course is designed to build on the previous course as a way to expand knowledge and understanding while developing the skills and competencies needed to be a professional social worker. Students should be able to connect previous knowledge with practice, but students are often unable to connect theory to practice.

Social constructivism has strong ties to the development of social work core competencies and skills. Interaction with peers helps social work students construct knowledge and explore values, biases, world views, and beliefs regarding class, race, and sexual preference (Keddell, 2011). Social constructivism can also be used to help students develop critical reflection and theory-specific practice approaches, both of which are essential for social work students and professionals (Keddell, 2011). By shifting the focus to the social work student and creating opportunities for knowledge and skill development through increased social interactions and activities, educators can support students in their efforts to assess, reflect, and assimilate new knowledge and skills (Brandon & All, 2010). By participating in the study, students will create opportunities for knowledge and skill development. They will answer questions about the connection of theory to practice and about their current knowledge, skills, and beliefs. In the process, they may develop new understanding of the application of theory to practice.

Review of the Broader Problem

This section includes current peer-reviewed journals and professional literature on the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (CSWE, 2008) identifying the field practicum as social work's signature pedagogy. I explore recommendations for strengthening the field practicum and enhancing students' ability to integrate theory and practice. This section also provides a brief overview of the evolution of social work as it relates to direct and community practice. I review teaching and learning strategies intended to enhance students' ability to connect theory to practice within the field practicum. I also provide a critical review of the broader problem and offer

recommendations on improving social work education through the use of empowerment and social constructivism.

To reach saturation in this literature review, I used the following databases: ERIC, EBSCO, SocINDEX, Dissertations, SAGE, Thoreau, and multiple books. The following key words were used: *social work*, *social work practice*, *field practicum*, *theory*, *social work education*, *history*, *origin*, *empowerment theory*, *constructivism*, and *social constructivism*. The current research and peer-reviewed literature revealed consistent agreement related to the need to improve students' ability to connect theory to practice within the field practicum. I also discovered an abundance of peer-reviewed literature related to teaching and learning strategies resulting in improved student integration of theory and practice. What follows are the theoretical perspectives, a brief evolution of social work, and the literature related to the identified problem.

Social work is informed by the profession's core values of service, social justice, the dignity and value of the person, integrity, competence, and the significance of human relationships (Andrews, 2012; Hepworth & Larsen, 2016). According to the NASW (2018), social work is the professional action of assisting individuals, groups, or communities in improving or restoring their ability to engage in social change as a way to improve conditions. Social work originated out of a need for social justice and advocacy for those who were unable to help themselves. Jane Addams has been identified as one of the earliest social workers (Zastrow, 2013). Her work in Chicago through Hull House has been identified as an early form of community practice as she, and those working with her, were instrumental in impacting policies and laws on a local, state, and national level

(Zastrow, 2013). Settlement houses such as Hull House stressed societal reform and worked to change institutions as a way to help those in need. Settlement houses were established in urban areas and typically immigrant neighborhoods (Zastrow, 2013). The houses focused on addressing urban problems (Laine Scales & Kelly, 2011). Some of the projects initiated by those involved in Hull House included the Immigrants' Protective League, the Juvenile Protection Association, and the first juvenile courts in the nation. Addams and her cohorts also influenced the Illinois legislature to enact protective legislation for women and children in 1893. Their efforts reached the national level with the formation of the Federal Children's Bureau and the passage of a federal child labor law in 1916 (Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, 2009). Mary Richmond, one of the founders of social work, began her career in Baltimore, Maryland with the Charity Organization Society (COS). The COS usually did not give money to those in need. They coordinated charitable resources and kept records of those receiving assistance. The COS emphasized changing individuals (Laine Scales & Kelly, 2011; Zastrow, 2013). Richmond was the general secretary of the COS in Baltimore and then in Philadelphia (Murdach, 2011). While in Philadelphia, Richmond founded the Pennsylvania Child Labor Committee, the Public Charities Association, the juvenile court, and the Housing Association (NASW Foundation, 2014). Richmond's advocacy included seeking to improve the image of social work and striving to improve the profession of social work through a standard set of skills and education (Murdach, 2011; NASW Foundation, 2014). Settlement house workers and charity organization workers used empowerment

with their clients. Clients were viewed as active agents of their lives working with others on their behalf (Bransford, 2011).

Addams' work in the settlement houses found its place in the curriculum of social work education as the basis for community practice (Johnson, 2004). Richmond developed a comprehensive statement outlining the principles of direct practice and introduced the topic of case work (Murdach, 2011; NASW Foundation, 2014). Most introductory social work courses cover these two early movements in the development of the social work profession (Laine Scales & Kelly, 2011). Early social workers provided the foundation for developing the levels of practice.

Social work education is designed to prepare students to function as professional social workers. The CSWE uses the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards to accredit social work programs (CSWE, 2015). The Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards outlined the standards for professional competence and encourage social work programs to use conventional and emerging curricular designs to promote consistency among programs while allowing for program distinction (CSWE, 2015). The Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards identified field education as the signature pedagogy of social work in 2008 and elevated its status within social work education (CSWE, 2008). Ghiţiu and Mago-Maghiar (2011) emphasized the importance of the field practicum in social work education and indicated the practicum is the fundamental way for students to translate theory into practice. Holden, Barker, Rosenberg, Kuppens, and Ferrell (2010) acknowledged the importance of the field placement within social work education and asserted that signature pedagogy would be more credible if it was

supported by stronger evidence. Holden et al. conducted a systematic review to examine

evidence related to the signature pedagogy designation and determined no studies passed

the initial review. Holden et al. did not refute the assertion that the field practicum is the

signature pedagogy within social work education. Pelech, Barlow, Badry, and Elliot

(2009) agreed that the field practicum offers students the opportunity to integrate

knowledge and practice and stated the heart of social work education is the field

practicum. Pelech et al. did not offer evidence disputing the field practicum as signature

pedagogy social work education.

The field practicum is designed to provide students the opportunity to put

classroom knowledge into practice (Homonoff, 2008). However, studies have indicated

that the field practicum suffers from a lack of connection between theory and practice

(Bogo et al., 2017; Larrison & Korr, 2013; Lee & Fortune, 2013a, 2013b; Reupert, 2009;

Sieminski & Seden, 2011; Singh, 2010; Wayne et al., 2010; Williamson & Chang, 2009).

Larrison and Korr (2013) identified the theory-to-practice gap as a long-standing issue

within social work education. Although Larrison and Korr offered no explanation for the

lack of integration. Williamson and Chang (2009) suggested that despite educators' best

efforts, students often experience an inability to connect theories to professional practice.

Students often do not use what they have learned in the classroom or apply very little

knowledge to their practice in the field practicum. Because postsecondary education is

designed to prepare students for their careers, Williamson and Chang (2009) conducted a

study examining problem-based learning and encouraged faculty to engage in the

scholarship of teaching and learning to improve practice and assist students in the

integration of theory and practice. Williamson and Chang (2009) found

by improving their own practice, faculty could create instructional activities better

designed to increase student integration of theory and practice. Lee and Fortune (2013b)

reported that students experience difficulty applying concepts and theories learned in the

classroom within the field practicum for many reasons. Students may be overwhelmed

with the amount of knowledge they are expected to integrate while in the field practicum,

or they may experience a disruption when moving from the classroom into their

practicum (Lee & Fortune, 2013b). Students have also shared either minimal use of

theory or no awareness of the use of theory while in the field practicum (Lee & Fortune,

2013b). Reupert (2009) identified the inability to connect theory to practice as a gap

between insight and practice. Reupert explored the use of self-awareness activities to

increase students' insight, and suggesting that the theories students choose are related to

their sense of self.

The application of theory in social work practice is typically a challenge for

students, and bridging the gap has been a longstanding concern for educators (Reupert,

2009). In an effort to support students and enhance the integration of theory to practice,

the authors organized a study day and examined successful learning strategies which

produced student linkage of theory and practice (Sieminski & Seden, 2001). Several

successful strategies were identified including student use of reflection and the use of

case study scenarios to encourage identification of theories and application of those

theories (Sieminski & Seden, 2011). As a result, much research has been conducted to

identify teaching and learning strategies that will assist students in developing the ability to connect their knowledge and skills to practice.

Most research has focused solely on activities which engage students in the classroom and field such as team-based learning, problem-based learning, and some minimal use of simulated client situations. Sung-Chan and Yuen-Tsang (2008) discussed the value of reciprocal-reflection used to guide students as they changed from an applied model perspective to a collaborative approach in an effort to address the issue. The use of reciprocal-reflection and collaboration resulted in students reporting an enhanced learning experience and a stronger ability to integrate theory and practice (Sung-Chan & Yuen-Tsang, 2008). In another study, standardized client simulations were used to assess effective teaching and to evaluate student competence (Logie, Bogo, Regehr, & Regehr, 2013). The use of simulations also increased student ability to connect theory to practice (Logie et al., 2013; Sunarich & Rowan, 2017). Sieminski and Seden (2011) examined techniques used by tutors which resulted in enhanced student ability to connect theory to practice. Student use of role play, case studies, group activities and self-reflection within the field practicum appeared to produce the strongest connection between theory and practice (Sieminski & Seden, 2011). Lee and Fortune (2013a) looked at patterns in learning activities and found conceptual linkage activities combined with team-based or collaborative learning resulted in an increased ability to connect theory to practice. In a follow up article, the researchers also suggested there is a connection between enhanced learning outcomes and hands on learning within the field practicum as opposed to activities requiring thought (Lee & Fortune, 2013b). Il, Akbas, and Topcoglu (2012)

identified active learning as one of the most important approaches with the potential to bridge the gap between knowledge and practice. They suggested active learning allows the student to be a part of their education. The student develops an ability to find creative solutions to client needs (Il et al., 2012). While these studies produced evidence of enhanced student ability to connect theory to practice, none of the teaching and learning strategies utilized has had a long-term impact on the integration of theory and practice suggesting there is a need for continued research.

Wayne et al. (2010) re-examined the identification of the field practicum as social work's signature pedagogy based on Shulman's criteria for signature pedagogy. Shulman coined the term signature pedagogy to define the characteristic types of teaching and learning used to develop future practitioners of a profession (Shulman, 2005). Shulman (2005) identified three fundamental dimensions of professional work and considered those critical aspects essential areas of instruction for students of those professions. The three dimensions are how to think, how to perform, and how to act with integrity. In an article analyzing the field practicum-signature pedagogy fit, Wayne et al. (2010) identified areas of conformity and divergence between signature pedagogy defined and the application of the field practicum in social work education and named the lack of continuity in the field practicum from program to program as one divergence from Shulman's criteria. In an article designed to contribute to the discussion of the identification of the field practicum as the signature pedagogy in social work education, Larrison & Korr (2013) presented an expanded concept of social work's signature pedagogy which emphasized the development of a professional self in addition to the

field practicum. In both articles, the researchers agreed partially with the identification of the field practicum as the signature pedagogy but felt that other factors needed to be included within the way social work defined signature pedagogy (Larrison & Korr, 2013). Miller (2010) proposed the development of socialization of the profession of social work through collaboration including the educational and practice settings. Singh (2010) examined the roles and responsibilities of faculty and field instructors and concluded there is a need to develop the role of the field instructor in addition to a need for faculty to collaborate with and support field instructors. Likewise, Lyter (2012) supported the need to develop the role of the field instructor as a way to provide direction for the development of the field practicum. Stone (2016) suggested the need for consistency in how field instructors perceive competence as they assess student skills and abilities in order to make recommendations to universities regarding their students' capabilities. Molina et al. (2018) encourages collaboration between the faculty, field instructors, and students when developing student learning contracts designed to assist students in making connections between theory and practice. Henderson (2010) believed there is confusion between the roles of field supervisor and the faculty advisor or assessor and the issue needs to be addressed as a way to support student learning. There is a necessity to develop a clear statement related to the purpose of the practicum and the relationship between faculty and field supervisors (Gursansky & Le Sueur, 2012). Kahn and Holody (2012) determined there is a need for collaboration between social work programs and field agencies. In an article designed to provide ways social work faculty can support field instructors, the authors provided techniques and activities which could

be done in the classroom and field practicum. While Vitali (2011) supported

collaboration between all social work educators in the development of more reliable

assessment tools used to measure student competency in the field practicum. Vitali

(2011) also called for better communication between educators and field instructors as

well as clearly defined roles and responsibilities for faculty and field supervisors.

Although each article examined a different facet of the field practicum, researchers are

aligned with the desire for changes within social work education to address the need for

team work between faculty and field instructors in order to create continuity across social

work programs.

Researchers have established that students have a difficult time connecting theory

to practice within the field practicum. The disconnect experienced by students has been

attributed to the broad issues presented in social work courses that differ from field

experiences which focus on dealing with the needs of clients in one type of practice

setting. There is also a belief that the concepts presented in the classroom are difficult to

apply in a practice environment (Vayda & Bogo, 1991). Regardless of the reason, current

strategies available have addressed multiple teaching and learning issues and could be

adjusted in order to continue to improve teaching and learning in social work education.

Team-based learning is one strategy that has been utilized to address the teaching and

learning issue by bridging the gap between knowledge and practice (Gillespie, 2012).

Team-based learning provides a flexible approach to group work and could easily be used

to support collaboration between faculty and field instructors (Gillespie, 2012). The

application of team-based learning would build group cohesiveness among the students

and also between faculty and field instructors which would strengthen the field practicum experience (Gillespie, 2012; Kahn & Holody, 2012; Singh, 2010).

Staempfli, Kunz, and Tov (2012) utilized the process of reflection and collaboration among students and professionals to connect theoretical, practical, and ethical knowledge linked to narratives to support integration of theory and practice. The authors developed a project involving social work students and professionals (Staempfli et al., 2012). Students were placed in small groups and given a typical social work situation. Over a period of 10 weeks, the students deconstructed the situation and used reflection and collaboration to determine a plan for the "client" (Staempfli et al., 2012). The results supported an increase in ability to connect theory and practice through the use of reflection and collaboration (Staempfli et al., 2012). Gillespie (2012) indicated collaborative work fostered learning and an appreciation for the development of skills that allow students to examine, debate, and convey the best approaches to deal with the complexities of social work practice. Heule et al. (2017) also encouraged collaborative work as a way of bridging the gap. The researchers believed collaboration between social work students and other university students who had received social services in the past could provide social work students hand on experience in a classroom setting (Heule et al., 2017). Askheim et al. (2017) conducted a follow up study examining a six-week course attended by social work students and people with experience utilizing social services. The course was designed to challenge the theory to practice gap by including clients in the solution. The exposure to the client perspectives and input provided social

work students an understanding of the importance of being a competent practitioner (Askheim et al., 2017).

      Conceptual linkage activities, problem-based learning, client simulations, and other online learning options provided additional strategies to address this teaching and learning issue. Lee and Fortune (2013b) identified conceptual linkage activity as a concept used to describe a learning opportunity that connects students' practice to theoretical principles specific to the students' field practicum. The authors conducted a longitudinal study of first year master level students. The students completed questionnaires pertaining to learning activities, self-evaluation, and overall satisfaction with the field placement (Lee & Fortune, 2013b). The findings showed that conceptual linkage activities produce stronger learning outcomes than observation or participatory activities (Lee & Fortune, 2013b). The use of client simulations, multiple online learning methods, and a modified version of problem-based learning in conjunction with a staged approach or some type of instructional scaffolding also supported strong learning outcomes (Logie et al., 2013; Sieminski & Seden, 2011; Williamson & Chang, 2009). In each instance, researchers identified and supported the use of reflection and self-assessment as a way to increase student learning outcomes (Logie et al., 2013; Sieminski & Seden, 2011; Williamson & Chang, 2009). Research supported reflective journals assist in the identification of common themes in practice situations, encourages the development of self-assessment, provides insights into personal biases, and supports the application of theory to practice (Norton, Russell, Wisner, & Uriarte, 2011; Reupert, 2009). Students also reported higher levels of satisfaction in the field practicum when

participatory activities were combined with conceptual linkage activities or reflection

activities (Lee & Fortune, 2013a; Lee & Fortune, 2013b; Logie et al., 2013; Sieminski &

Seden, 2011; Williamson & Chang, 2009). Previous research has offered many possible

solutions which may need to be adjusted or re-examined after the completion of the

proposed study.

The research completed regarding student inability to connect theory to practice

in the field practicum supports that there is indeed a long-standing issue. This issue is

present at the local universities in North Texas as well as within social work education in

a much broader context. This would seem to indicate that social work education, as a

whole, needs to be improved in order to resolve the problem of student inability to

connect theory to practice in the field practicum. Researchers from all over the world

have studied student inability to connect theory to practice. I utilized studies from several

different countries including the United States, Australia, China, Japan, Sweden, and

Czechoslovakia.

Implications

The findings of this study can lead the researcher in several directions. Although

strategies to improve student ability to connect theory and practice have been identified,

the problem still exists. It was anticipated the findings of the data collection and analysis

would support the students believe there is indeed an inability to connect theory to

practice within the field practicum. One potential project direction derived from the

findings could be to identify students who have issues connecting theories to practice

when they are taking social work courses during their junior year and then providing

additional support to those students. The identification process would occur during in class discussions, activities, and role plays and the additional support could be treated like a lab course. The students would be exposed to social work concepts, competencies, theories, and values while in the class and also be given outside activities designed to improve their ability to connect theory to practice. Another tentative project direction involved changing how the field practicum is currently implemented by introducing a team-based teaching approach involving faculty and field instructors. Currently, there is very little interaction between faculty and field instructors. In some cases, field instructors are not even licensed social workers which could impact the entire field practicum experience. A team-based approach would involve more communication between faculty, students and the field instructors. It would also include field instructors attending the field seminar on a weekly basis. This would ensure that students are receiving instruction at their field locations that support social work concepts, competencies, theories, and values. Since changing the field practicum relates to accreditation standards, it will be necessary for the team-based teaching curriculum to be aligned with the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards of the Council on Social Work Education.

The project selected involves the development of the use of simulations within curriculum delivery prior to the field practicum as a way to provide immersive experiential learning related to social work core concepts, competencies, theories, and values. By incorporating simulated learning experiences in every social work course, students would be connecting theory to practice on a regular basis before being placed in

their field practicum locations. The repeated experience of connecting theory to practice should strengthen students' ability to make that connection. Although I selected the use of simulations within curriculum delivery as the project, I believe that any of these projects could create a learning environment that could potentially close the gap in student ability to connect theory to practice.

Summary

The field practicum is a significant aspect of social work education. It has been identified as social work education's signature pedagogy. Each social work student must participate in the field experience prior to graduation. The field practicum is designed to provide students the opportunity to integrate knowledge and practice. Student lack of connection between theory and practice is a well-documented issue in social work education. Previous research has focused on teaching and learning strategies utilized to increase student ability to connect theory to practice. An extensive review of the literature showed very little research involving the student perspective related to the issue. The research reviewed by the writer confirmed the issue of student inability to connect theory to practice, showed that the problem has been studied extensively from the perspective of developing teaching and learning strategies to decrease the gap in student ability, and indicated a need for further research examining the student perspective on the inability to connect theory to practice in the field practicum.

In Section 2, the researcher provided a detailed account of the research methodology utilized for the study. The researcher has also included the information gathered during the interviews and observations, data analysis, and the findings of the

study. The resulting outcome of the study showed that students identify a gap in the

connection of theory to practice, students also had difficulty is recalling information

learned in their courses which lead the researcher to develop a project to address both

issues. Then in Section 3, the writer included information related to the project designed

to respond to the findings and information related to social change. The researcher's

reflections and conclusions are included in Section 4.

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Section 2: The Methodology

Qualitative Research Design and Approach

Qualitative research in education is conducted in several settings and can take many forms (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Yin, 2017). What sets qualitative research apart from quantitative research is the use of words to provide a rich description of the participant's thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes (Creswell & Creswell 2018). Although qualitative research is seen as less structured, the researcher follows a rigorous methodological path with a dedication to formal and explicit procedures (Yin, 2017). In the current study, I explored the perspectives of students to understand their beliefs and attitudes about the inability to connect theory to practice in the field practicum, which was in alignment with the case study design. A case study is a comprehensive exploration of one setting, subject, or event (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). A case study is also used in organizational settings and is a common research method in social work (Yin, 2017). This design provided the best fit because it allowed me to develop a better understanding of how students perceive the issue of connecting theory to practice (see Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). Grounded theory research was ruled out because I was not attempting to generate a theory to explain why there is an issue with students' ability to connect theory to practice within the field practicum. A grounded theory design is used to generate a theory explaining a process, action, or interaction regarding a topic (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). An ethnographic design is used to study a particular group of people in their homes or workplaces to develop a description of the group (Creswell & Creswell,

2018). Although the current study involved social work students, it did not involve examination of a specific group of people.

The progression of a case study is illustrated by a funnel. The beginning of the study is considered the wide end of the funnel with the researcher considering the feasibility of the site and data sources. As the study moves forward, the work develops more focus, questions are formulated, and data are collected and analyzed (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). It is important for the researcher to remain open to the possibility of modifying the plan during the study in response to unexpected events or information (Yin, 2017).

Participants

The case study was conducted at a local university with a social work program. The population included social work students enrolled in the final seminar and field practicum courses. Typical sampling, which is a form of purposeful sampling, was used to select participants. Typical sampling allows the researcher to study individuals or a site representing what is considered typical to an outsider (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The students enrolled in seminar and field practicum represented typical social work students nearing the end of their formal education. Students enrolled in seminar and field practicum were in their final semester of school and had taken upper-level social work courses or were concurrently enrolled in advanced social work courses at the time of their enrollment in the seminar and field practicum. According to faculty at the institution, enrollment in the seminar and practicum courses during the fall and summer is typically small, averaging between 10 and 15 students. However, enrollment in the spring semester

is between 25 and 30 students (faculty, personal communication, September 15, 2014). The data for the current study were collected during the summer session, and student enrollment in the seminar course was 14 students. The sample consisted of six social work students who volunteered to participate.

Two measures used to determine a satisfactory sample size are saturation and redundancy. Saturation occurs when the researcher is immersed in the subject matter and those participating in the study (Holosko & Thyer, 2011). Redundancy occurs when no new information emerges from data collection, and this typically occurs with 10 to 15 participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is acceptable within a case study to select a small number of participants because it allows the researcher to develop a holistic view of the issue being examined (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The purpose of qualitative research is not to generalize information but rather to focus on specific information; therefore, it is not necessary to have large numbers of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016). To attain saturation and redundancy, I attempted to interview 10 participants; however, the class was small and few students volunteered to participate, so I was able to recruit only six participants. Nevertheless, the small number of participants allowed me to explore their perspectives in great depth. Participants' demographics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

	Ethnicity	Sex	Age
Angela	African American	Female	36
Brenda	Indian	Female	22

Carol	African American	Female	23
Donna	African American	Female	22
Edna	European American	Female	50
Frances	European American	Female	24

My first contact with the students occurred during the recruitment phase. After Walden IRB approval for the study (# 03-28-16-0359175) was obtained via e-mail on March 27, 2016, I sent an e-mail on May 11, 2016 to all students enrolled in the seminar and field practicum course seeking volunteers interested in participating in the study. To provide potential participants an opportunity to review the consent form prior to signing, I attached a copy of the consent form to the e-mail sent to students. Interested students contacted me and reviewed the consent form. This was done to establish a working relationship with the participants, protect the participants, and inform them of their rights; disclosure of this kind helped in building rapport (see Creswell & Poth, 2016). According to DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), rapport is established as the potential participants experience "apprehension, exploration, co-operation, and participation" (p. 316). The consent form included information concerning the role of the researcher, the purpose of the study, the length of the study, and identified risks of participation.

The ethical principles outlined for research and literature by the National Association of Social Workers (2014), the American Psychological Association (2010), and the Walden University institutional review board (IRB) are similarly aligned and were followed in the study. The consent form followed APA, NASW, and IRB protocols. The participants signed the consent forms in person before the interview or electronically prior to the phone interview. Participant confidentiality was ensured by the use of number

codes. All documentation related to the participants included the number assigned (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018). All data, including recordings and transcripts, will be stored in a locked fireproof file cabinet for 5 years.

Qualitative research includes selecting a research location and obtaining permission to collect data at the location (Creswell & Poth, 2016). I obtained approval from IRBs and individuals at the research location. In seeking access to the site and participants, I contacted university representatives and inquired about the process to receive permission to conduct research. I conducted preliminary inquiries to gain knowledge of the formal system related to gaining access (see Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). A permission letter (Appendix B) was submitted to the study site once IRB approval had been received. However, I learned that Walden IRB approval was all that was necessary to proceed with data collection.

Data Collection

An important aspect of research is data collection. Creswell (2016) suggested grouping data into four basic types of information: interviews, observations, documents, and audiovisual material. Researchers should familiarize themselves with the topic of the study and any questions being asked (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Having reviewed the literature and the research question, I determined the best way to answer the research question was to conduct student interviews, observe students in the seminar classroom, and review previous student evaluations.

Interviewing involves a sequence of steps (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The sequence I selected included eight steps: choose the interview questions, identify interviewees,

select the type of interview to conduct, identify recording procedures, design and follow an interview protocol, select a location for interviews, obtain participant consent, and use good interview procedures (see Creswell, 2016). I conducted unstructured, open-ended, one-on-one interviews with each student using general and focused questions designed to increase understanding of the central phenomenon (see Creswell & Poth, 2016). Initial interview questions were designed to build rapport and pertained to the participant's interest in studying social work. Four interviews took place face-to-face and two by phone. The face-to-face interviews provided the opportunity to observe facial expressions and body language in addition to exploring the participants' beliefs, attitudes, and experiences. The phone interviews offered the participants a more relaxed setting but prevented me from observing body language and facial expressions. The site for the face-to-face interviews was determined by each participant. Three face-to-face participants selected the lobby of a purpose building. One participant asked to walk while the interview took place. Both phone interviews took place at a time requested by the participants. Each participant selected the day and time of her interview.

As the interviews unfolded, the questions gradually moved to specific information related to the integration of theory and practice within the field practicum and the field experience. The questions developed for the interviews were open-ended to allow the participants to share their experiences, feelings, thoughts, and perspectives without me providing a specific direction. The use of open-ended questions aligned with the research question, which related to students' feelings regarding the pervasive issue of bridging theory to practice. The interviews were audiotaped, and brief notes were taken as well.

An interview protocol was used during the interviews. The form contained ample space to document responses. The interviews were audio recorded to increase the trustworthiness of the findings and provide me with the opportunity to accurately represent the thoughts and feelings of the students. I asked follow-up questions when needed.

Once the interviews were completed, I asked a professional transcriptionist to sign a confidentiality agreement and transcribe the audio-taped interviews. The transcribed interviews were sent to participants to review and provide feedback. Three of the participants returned their reviewed interviews with no changes recommended. The other three participants did not respond to the e-mails and did not return phone calls requesting feedback on the transcripts. Therefore, I moved forward with the analysis of the data using NVivo11, a computer file used for analysis of qualitative data (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018; QSR International's NVivo 11 Software, n.d.)

Observations are a significant part of data collection in qualitative research. Observations require the use of sight, touch, hearing, and sometimes touch and smell. The researcher uses observations according to the purpose of the research and the research question (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In the current study, I conducted two observations lasting 45 minutes each. I conducted the observations as a nonparticipant observer. Creswell (2012b) noted that a qualitative observer may conduct observations as a nonparticipant observer who visits a site and records notes without becoming involved in activities or discussions with the participants.

During the observations, I was introduced by faculty. To obtain an optimum understanding of the site and the participants, several observations may be conducted (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The seminar class met once a week. I looked for student comments or feedback related to the integration of theory and practice. I also observed activities completed in class designed to enhance the connection of theory and practice.

An observation protocol that included descriptive and reflective field notes was used during the observations. Descriptive and reflective field notes were recorded; descriptive field notes provided details related to what happened during the interviews and observations. The reflective field notes provided documentation of possible biases regarding my thoughts and feelings. Any personal biases reflected in the fieldnotes have been addressed in the limitations section. The field notes included reflections and observations, and the data were structured with opinions, interpretations, and hunches on the left and observations and descriptions on the right (see Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The two-column format provided organization and helped me remain focused (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I recorded the number of times students discussed concerns related to theory and practice. The observation protocol was developed to align with the research question. The protocol ensured quality data collection by helping me anticipate problems and remain sensitive to any ethical issues related to the quality of the data (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I transcribe the observations gave them to the instructor of the field practicum course to review for accuracy. The instructor reviewed the transcript and verified my observations and interpretations.

Documents were an additional form of data collection. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) suggested that documents may be used in support of interviews and observations. The documents of interest in the study were previous seminar course evaluations. I submitted a request to review previous evaluations from seminar courses. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) noted that a researcher who has established good rapport may be given access to internally produced documents. I intended to examine the documents for relevance in answering the research question (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018). However, after reviewing the evaluations, I concluded that they contained no information related to the topic of the study. Therefore, the evaluations were not used in the data analysis.

Researchers conducting studies need to anticipate issues in the field when collecting data (Creswell & Poth, 2016). I was a student at the local university more than 20 years ago and was acquainted with the current social work program director at the university. I had supervised counseling interns from the local university but had no contact with social work students. I had no previous or current relationship with any potential participants. The professional relationship I had with faculty at the local university helped me gain access to the university and the students but did not influence data collection and analysis. As a field practicum supervisor, I experienced firsthand students' inability to connect theory to practice. The researcher considered this potential bias and refrained from sharing personal experiences with participants and faculty in an effort to avoid impacting interviews and observations. As an additional method to control for bias, the researcher maintained a journal for the purpose of documenting personal

reflections, concerns, comments, and questions. I then referred to the journal when examining the data and during data analysis.

Data Analysis

Analyzing and interpreting qualitative data involved a six-step process: preparing and organizing the data, exploring and coding the database, describing findings and forming themes, representing and reporting findings, interpreting the meaning of the findings, and validating the accuracy of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I utilized a table of sources to organize material. The material was organized by type and kept in folders immediately following each interview or observation. I created folders for interviews and observations on the computer for use once the documents had been transcribed. Duplicate paper copies of interviews and observations were utilized as a back-up method for organization of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Because I conducted interviews and observations, there was a need to convert the data to a document for analyzing. Transcription was the process by which all audiotaping and field notes were converted to text data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I located a transcriptionist who converted all interview and observation data to text. *NVivo11®* is the software program that was used to organize and analyze data. Prior to the coding process, a preliminary exploratory analysis of the data was completed by the researcher in order to acquire an overall sense of the data and determine if there was a need for additional data. I scrutinized the documents to identify discrepant information.

I developed a coding system which included the process of reviewing the data for patterns and topics, documenting words and phrases to represent the patterns and topics,

and developing coding categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The interview transcripts were reviewed several times and a short list of five or six categories sometimes referred to as lean codes was developed. I then developed approximately 10-15 categories of information and worked to reduce and combine those categories into four themes to be used in the narrative (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Initially, a context code included general information about the subjects which may or may not have impacted the beliefs, feelings, and attitudes of the subjects, but allow the study to be placed in a larger context (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Additional codes included common themes identified which relate to participants' beliefs, attitudes, and feelings about the topic which related directly to answering the research question. The code names were derived from names the researcher composed which seemed to provide the best description of the information provided by the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016). I was able to use the subject's beliefs and attitudes to build a rich description and develop the themes identified (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The codes identified assisted in providing detailed and descriptive information to assist in supporting the findings as they related to the research question. Additional codes were utilized to identify unexpected themes emerging from the data as well as themes which were difficult to classify.

I reviewed interview and observation transcripts several times as a measure of quality control. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) suggested the researcher continually confronts bias with the data. However, the data bears the weight of any interpretation and produces a more detailed rendering of events than any personal opinion or bias the researcher may have considered. In order to achieve triangulation or a merging of data collected to

increase credibility, multiple methods of data collection included interviews and observations. In order to increase the accuracy of the findings, a peer review of the interview and observation transcripts was conducted and peer debriefing was used to control for bias, confirm coding, categories, and to corroborate results (Yin, 2017). A cohort from the doctoral program, who currently works as a faculty member at a university, peer-reviewed the interview and observation transcripts and provided feedback to control for bias, confirmed identified codes and categories, and corroborated the findings. The extended and repeated observations mentioned previously were also utilized to increase the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). Yin (2014) asserted a test of bias is how one handles contrary evidence. In striving for credibility, the researcher divulged all results including discrepant information as possible limitations of the findings.

Data Analysis Results

The analysis of data reported in this project study was based on the data collected from six participants that I interviewed and observed. All of the participants were female social work students currently enrolled in their final seminar and field practicum courses. The findings indicated that students from a local North Texas university believe that students do have an inability to connect theory to practice in the field practicum. Each participant was provided a unique code to the researcher as a means to protect her confidentiality. An analysis of the data collected from the six participants showed that although the students agree that there is a student inability to connect theory to practice, the general thought was that the gap in ability is not of great concern to the students.

The participants involved in this research were excited about taking part in a study that could contribute social work education. During the interviews, each participant appeared or sounded relaxed and seemed comfortable with the interview protocol and the research questions. The participants understood the goals of this study as well. Although each interview was different, the participants were willing to respond to the questions and elaborate when necessary for clarification purposes. The participants were able to share their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs related to the topic of student inability to connect theory to practice within the field practicum. It has been stated that the empowerment theory encourages thought as it relates to strengths versus needs (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). The sharing of participants' thoughts, feelings and beliefs, in regards to their strengths and needs in the field practicum, reinforced the potential for the students to have a positive impact on the issue of connecting theory to practice while also experiencing empowerment at the same time. The participants had a clearer understanding of their strengths and needs after the interviews. Social Constructivism has been defined as the building of knowledge and understanding gained through experience and social interaction with others (Sthapornnanon et al., 2009). During the interviews and observations, the exchange of information observed in the classroom and interviews not only increased or built on the participants' current knowledge, the students also gained understanding through their experiences and the social interaction. These combined experiences of the students, pulled together the research conducted and both of the theoretical perspectives of the empowerment theory and the theory of social constructivism.

The data as it relates to the identified problem of student inability to connect theory to practice and the research question, "How do social work students at a local university describe the issues related to the connection of theory to practice within the field practicum?" suggested that students either had difficulty recalling many of the theories they had learned, could identify a small number of the theories learned, or could not identify specific theories by name at all. Of the 15-20 theories learned in the social work courses, three participants could not recall any theories at all, one participant named one theory, one participant named two theories, and one participant was able to name three theories. This related directly to the research problem of student inability to connect theory to practice in the field practicum as how can a student connect theories that they either do not recall or cannot identify specifically. When asked if they had experienced issues connecting theory to practice personally, two respondents indicated that they had experienced the problem, the researcher observed a third student while actively experiencing the issue in the classroom, and three students indicated they had not experienced the problem themselves. This again directly relates to the research question, "How do social work students at a local university describe the issues related to the connection of theory to practice within the field practicum?" as students shared their beliefs and attitudes. Four of the six participants expressed no concerns about the problem of student inability to connect theory to practice and two students mentioned concerns. One student indicated she would have major concerns about any student who could not connect theory to practice and one student was concerned how the inability would impact her in graduate school. All of the students believed or expressed that the

inability to connect theory to practice was just part of the learning process and would be taken care of once they had jobs and supervisors to assist with the issue. This is a new insight into the issue of student inability to connect theory to practice. It encourages the question, if the issue is indeed a part of the learning process, should academics be concerned with the issue? I also wondered is there anything that can be done to improve student retention of learned material or to improve the ability to connect theory to practice? Finally, in answer to the research question, all of the participants agreed that there is a student issue connecting theory to practice. There was some difference in terms of the degree of inability.

In attempting to discuss discrepant information, I feel the need to draw attention to the fact that while only two students acknowledged experiencing difficulty connecting theory to practice, all of the participants believe that it is an issue. One participant specifically mentioned that the students either discussed the issue of experiencing difficulty connecting theory to practice in the classroom or in the hallway prior to class beginning. I also observed a student in the classroom experiencing the issue. However, the majority of the participants indicated that they had not heard the discussions. This could indicate that many of the students are not paying attention while in class or that they are not engaging in the discussion because it does not directly impact them. I still find it odd that so many of the participants did not recall this information. As stated previously, social constructivism focuses on students rather than educators and allows students to construct their own meaning and knowledge from experience (Fire & Casstevens, 2013; Sthapornnanon et al., 2009). By focusing on student thoughts, beliefs,

and feelings related to student inability to connect theory to practice, the interview process provided opportunities for the students to learn and construct new meaning through the experience thus incorporating another aspect of the theoretical perspective of social constructivism into the research as well. Four major themes emerged from the findings of the data: learned theories, concerns, theory to practice, and student beliefs related to theory and practice. The following is a culmination of the interviews and the participant responses with regard to the four themes.

The student participants of this study shared their knowledge of some of the theories learned over the course of their bachelor level education. From the time a student enters a social work program at a university, they learn approximately 15-20 different theories in the areas of cognitive development, aging, conflict resolution, human behavior and more. The participants are expected to be able to incorporate all of the theories they have learned into their practice with clients during the field practicum. The participants shared their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and experiences to answer the sub question, "What are some of the theories you have learned?"

Angela was asked "what are some of the theories you have learned in class" and responded, "I could probably tell you about a theory…couldn't name it". When asked a follow up question to explain a theory, the participant said, "So, why don't you tell me a theory and then I'll explain it". The participant was visibly uncomfortable so I decided to move forward with the interview. She remained uncomfortable for the remainder of the interview.

Brenda was very eager and excited to be interviewed. She appeared very happy and was very talkative. During the interview with Brenda just prior to discussing the topic of theories, she stated, "I learn by more of an example because usually you wouldn't tell your client…Oh this is a reference to a theory…You don't say that, so I need a brush up on my theories". Upon being asked if she could recall all of the theories learned in class, she responded, "Not all. Like I know there's like social learning theory and not too much about theory. It hasn't embedded but if someone talks about it, I think, Oh, that's what they theory is."

The interview with Carol was conducted via phone. This greatly impacted my ability to take field notes of her overall appearance and comfort with during the interview. She was very polite but I did get the impression that she was not very invested in the interview or the research process. When asked about the theories learned in class, she responded, "Umm, Systems Theory, Psychosocial theories, Constructive Theory". When asked if she could remember all of the theories, she said, "All of them? No". However, she did locate a chart she was given by one of her instructors that contained the names and descriptions of most of the theories discussed in her class. She indicated that when she needs to recall a theory she uses the chart.

Donna was very talkative and also excited to be a part of the research study. As with the other participants, she had walked at graduation in the spring ceremony and was completing her last required course; her field practicum. Her response to the question are you able to recall all of the theories that you learned was "No". She then went on to say, "If I get my notebook that would help a lot. I keep a lot of notes but off the top

of my head, no. Like if I, whenever I take the licensure exam, I will definitely

have to review them.”

When asked the same question, Edna responded, “I cannot name one theory”. I

asked the follow up question, “Are you able to recall anything specific about the theories

that you learned?” She responded,

“There are a couple. One had to do with people…I cannot. I 'm not

good with that. People, it said that people have a vision of how they

want their lives to be and that every decision we make is an attempt to

align our reality with that vision.”

The participant attempted to recall the name of the theory but was unable to do so and

finally stated, “I forgot the name of it, that theory”. The participant did not sound

uncomfortable or upset that she could not remember any theories by name but that was

difficult to determine because the interview was conducted by phone. She remained

upbeat and eager to continue answering questions during the interview.

Finally, Frances was asked to discuss the theories learned in her courses. She

responded by sharing that she could remember the cognitive behavioral theory and social

learning theory but mentioned that she could not explain “exactly what each one of those

is specifically”. She also shared that she was researching the contingency theory as part

of a research project. She appeared to be embarrassed that she could not recall any other

theories and also appeared uncomfortable acknowledging that she could not tell me what

each theory entailed. She did not directly answer the question, “…are you able to recall

all of the different theories that you learned”.

Overall, three of the participants could not recall even one learned theory. One participant was able to name one theory, one participant named two theories, and one participant named three theories. As stated previously, students learn between 15-20 different theories while studying different aspects of social work. The findings related to this particular theme suggest that there is either a breakdown between what is being taught and what the students are retaining, the students are not processing or studying the theories in a way that supports retention, or the students possibly memorize the theories in order to pass their exams but do not retain the information all of which could be directly related to problem of student inability to connect theory to practice. My thoughts and observations during the interviews as recorded in the field notes were that each participant answered honestly and to the best of their ability. I was also shocked at how little recall the students had as most of them had just taken a course in the spring that focused on many of the theories the students would use in their field practicums.

The purpose of the field practicum is to provide social work students with the opportunity to utilize the theories they have learned while working under supervision with clients. It is the students' first real exposure to practicing social work prior to the completion of their degrees. The theme of theory to practice was directly tied to the question have you encountered any difficulty connecting the theories learned into practice.

When asked the above stated question, Angela stated, "yes" to indicate that she has had difficulty connecting theory to practice. I asked two follow up questions. I asked her why she had experienced the difficulty and she responded, "Probably the way that I

studied the theories. I memorized for the class and it didn't stay with me". The participant also reported that she had heard other students were experiencing a difficulty as well. She stated that students had been discussing their issues with connecting theory and practice during the field seminar course both with the instructor and prior to class beginning. I observed the participant to be very straight forward during this part of the interview.

Brenda was more ambiguous in her response she stated, "Mm, I don't know, I just can't remember if something like this has come up where I thought I don't know what theory or I can't recall the theory, I can't answer that question". She then went on to say that "I just always try to do my best to the best of my ability". However, later in the interview she stated, "So far, no, I haven't…there are times when I get overwhelmed because I'm just tired". This participant seemed very driven to do well. My field impressions of Brenda were that she appeared to put a great deal of pressure on herself. It was my feeling that she was very uncomfortable with the thought that she might have an issue connecting theory to practice.

When asked if she had encountered any difficulty connecting theory to practice, Carol responded, "No because the systems theory applies to just about everything. A change in the part will result in a change to the whole". I also asked if she had ever heard about anyone having difficulty connecting theory to practice and she answered, "No because education is a lifelong thing. They should be touching up and learning while in placement". As stated previously, it was difficult to gain additional insight into this participant because the interview was conducted over the phone. She was very direct in

her responses. However, it caused me concern that she believed she could apply one theory to basically every situation or client.

Donna was asked if she experienced difficulty connecting theory to practice in her field practicum she answered "probably". I asked the follow up question, "Can you remember in what way"? She responded, "I didn't like consciously…you know, I wasn't consciously thinking okay, this is systems theory or this is this perspective". She went on to say,

> "I think it's difficult because when you learn about it, it's one thing,
>
> but then when you try to apply it and connect it to real life, it's different
>
> because if the teachers give us like examples of it, it might not be like exact".

She did not recall discussing the topic with her cohorts.

Edna stated she had not experienced any difficulty connecting theory to practice in her practicum. Rather, she reported that she considered her client's social environment saying, "That's how I apply my practice. I don't do the same things because they're all elderly". I was concerned with her response because earlier in the interview I noted that she could not recall one theory. I also noted that considering a client's social environment is important but that is not actually connecting theory and practice. This participant also did not recall her cohort discussing any difficulty connecting theory to practice.

Frances indicated that she had not really had to connect theory to practice. She also had not personally heard any of her cohorts indicate that they have had difficulty connecting theory to practice. She answered the questions clearly and quickly. My field impressions were that she didn't have more to say on the topic.

One other student signed an informed consent. She is identified as Glenda. She did not show up for her scheduled interview and did not respond to my attempts to reach her. However, she was in class the day of my observation. The students were involved in an activity related to values and ethics. The students were paired up and given scenarios to assess. There were three different theories the students should have been able to use to assess their "client". During the classroom observation, it became clear that Glenda was experiencing some difficulty connecting the theory to her practice scenario. She appeared confused and openly asked questions for clarification. She did not know the theories and could not apply them to the activity. She continued to struggle even after her instructor attempted to assist her.

In looking at the responses for this theme, I had two participants acknowledge that they experienced difficulty connecting theory to practice and I observed one student experiencing the issue. The three participants expressed that they did not experience difficulty but at least one of those participants could not identify even one theory earlier in their interview. There was one student who indicated that she had not had the opportunity to try to connect theory to practice. Clearly, since some of the students did experience the issue, there is support for the problem that student inability to connect theory to practice while in the field practicum exists. My field impressions also included notes related to the experiences of the students and my observation of Glenda who was experiencing the disconnect in class.

As each interview progressed, the theme of concerns emerged. It was a natural question to ask each participant whether they had concerns about their inability to

connect theory to practice or if they had concerns about other student inability to connect theory to practice. The responses to the question were met with honest and straight forward responses.

Angela said, "Not really, I think it will be alright" when asked if her inability to connect theory to practice caused her any concern. I asked her to explain her response and she said,

"Basically, because even when I begin my first job, I will not be alone.

I figure that ummm, I figure that I will have people I work with who

will be able to help me and then it will be alright. If it is a problem, then

I will just read."

She genuinely seemed unconcerned about the issue and for the first time during the interview, she did not appear uncomfortable. The interview ended shortly after and we went our separate ways. I noted that although Angela was uncomfortable, she was not uncomfortable with the questions. She seemed more uncomfortable with what I perceived as feelings of inadequacy or perhaps even fear of the unknown.

Brenda indicated that she was not concerned about her ability to connect theory to practice in her field practicum. She stated that she has a good field instructor who has a great deal of experience as a social worker and advises her as needed. When asked about concerns related to other students who may have difficulty connecting theory to practice, she stated "it depends". She did not clarify her statement and indicated that she was ready to move on. My personal impressions of this participant were that she became more

uncomfortable as the interview progressed perhaps because she was talking about her cohort. It was not really clear to me.

Carol indicated that she would be concerned about any student who had difficulty connecting theory to practice. She said,

> "Yes, it would concern me because they just came out of Practice 2
>
> and the information should be fresh. It makes me wonder why they
>
> would not be able to recall information they just learned like just a
>
> few weeks ago,".

My field impressions regarding this participant were that she takes her education very seriously. She sounded shocked that students would have issues recalling information.

Donna did not share any concerns related to clients when asked about student inability to connect theory to practice. She also did not actually indicate verbally that she had concerns. She said, "I think it will just take more practice and experience…". However, she did express concern related to her education:

> "I am concerned for graduate school to know the theories and stuff
>
> because I'll have to recall back and know how to apply it because I
>
> have heard that graduate school is a lot more like the application of
>
> what you've learned."

Donna did not recall any of her cohorts ever discussing concerns or issues with connecting theory to practice.

Edna stated she did not have any concerns. She indicated that she will work through any theory and practice issues when she gets her first job. She stated that in her

placement she is just shadowing and that she will rely on coworkers to assist her once she has graduated and started her first job. When asked if she had any concerns about her cohorts having difficulty connecting theory to practice she said, "No, because we are students, and I believe that once we are out there and can actually do something from beginning to end, of course with supervision, then we can see better what's happening".

When asked if she had concerns about being able to connect theory to practice, Frances replied, "I don't think so because when I look at it again, and I pull it back up just to refresh my memory on what the theories are, I don't have a difficulty in connecting it with certain situation". My field impressions included concerns that this student was only able to recall two theories earlier in her interview. She stated that she would process her contact with her clients later as a way to connect theory to practice but making that connection is important while one is working with a client. I also noted that it is not always possible to process later if one is seeing many clients a day.

The majority of the students (four of the six) indicated that they would have no concerns with having difficulty connecting theory to practice. Overall, the students seem to view the inability to connect theory to practice as part of the learning process. More than one student suggested that exposure to supervised situations would help as would reviewing the theories they have learned.

The final theme that presented itself answers the research question put forth which is, "How do social work students at a local university describe the issues related to the connection of theory to practice within the field practicum?" Each participant was asked to provide their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and attitudes related to the research question.

Participants Angela, Brenda, Carol, Donna, Edna, and Frances all indicated they believe that students do have an inability to connect theory to practice in the field practicum. Angela very quickly stated, "yes" when asked the research question. She went on to attribute the difficulty to the way students study. She stated, "Well, I don't think I am the only one who memorizes for tests and classes". Brenda did not state definitively that she believed students have difficulty connecting theory to practice. She said,

> "I think that just depends on where they're placed because some
>
> agencies are tougher than other agencies and some agencies have more
>
> rules and regulations for that theory to even be applied even though it
>
> should be, so it just depends on the agency and their rules and regulations".

Although Carol believed that "of course there are some people" who have difficulty connecting theory to practice, she also stated, "I think they would be outliers. Dr. Ricks hit those theories pretty hard and heavy in Practice II and that was just last semester". When asked to share her beliefs about student difficulty connecting theory to practice, Donna answered yes. I asked her to expand on that answer and she responded,

> "Well it probably varies for each person but, like I said, it's different
>
> from learning it in a textbook and writing papers about it and being
>
> tested on it than actually seeing how it connects to like working with
>
> your client and observing other people working with clients".

When asked her beliefs about student difficulty connecting theory to practice, Edna felt that if students do have an inability to connect theory to practice it is "because, like, in my situation, you're really still a student". In answering the research question, Frances

said, "I don't know if they have difficulty connecting it. I just know that there is so much information given to you at once that, yeah, just specifically…as far as recalling it all, it's just there's so much information".

When reviewing the research question, "How do social work students at a local university describe the issues related to the connection of theory to practice within the field practicum?", the findings support that some of the participants have experienced difficulty connecting theory to practice in their field practicums. All of the participants expressed belief that students do have an inability to connect theory to practice. It just may be at varying levels and for different reasons. The outcome of the findings supports not only the existence of the problem of student inability to connect theory to practice in the field practicum but all the years of research indicating the issue continues to remain a problem.

I reviewed interview transcripts, observation transcripts, and reflective journal entries several times as a measure of quality control and in order to achieve triangulation. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) suggested the researcher continually confronts bias with the data. However, the data bears the weight of any interpretation and produces a more detailed rendering of events than any personal opinion or bias the researcher may have considered. The observations mentioned previously were utilized to increase the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). Additional strategies utilized to increase the trustworthiness of the findings and assure accuracy and credibility included field notes and journaling. In order to increase the accuracy of the findings, member checking occurred, a peer review of the interview

and observation transcripts was conducted, and peer debriefing was used to control for bias, confirm coding, categories, and corroborate results (Yin, 2017).

The peer debriefer holds a Doctorate of Education from Walden University. She is currently a professor at Lakeland Community College. She agreed to participate and contribute to this study by reviewing the findings. I consulted with the peer debriefer during data collection and interpretation. She was provided with interview transcripts, observations transcripts, field notes, and the reflective journal. The identities of the participants were protected through their self-generated numbers and the coding process. The coding process also provided a thorough description of the setting and themes for analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Once the peer debriefer reviewed all documents, dialogue took place via email and through phone conversations. Throughout the entire process, the peer debriefer offered feedback, asked questions related to the identified problem, research question, research documents, and offered recommendations related to research sources. The research was reviewed through triangulation to increase the credibility of the study. Yin (2014) asserted a test of bias is how one handles contrary evidence. In striving for credibility, I divulged all results including discrepant information as possible limitations of the findings.

What I feel is the biggest insight from the research is that overall, most of the students view the inability to connect theory to practice as a part of the learning process. The issue has been studied for more than 30 years by those in field of social work education which indicates that those in the academic field view the issue differently than their students. Of course, the obvious limitation of the insight is the small size of the

participant pool. The insight would be more significant if the research findings could be duplicated with a larger group of participants. Further research on student's perspectives will be needed to increase the validity and credibility of the findings.

The interviews, observations, and field notes supported the need for improved ways to strengthen the recall of the theories learned in class in order to increase student ability to connect theory to practice. As a result of the findings, I began searching for innovative ways to strengthen student ability to connect theory to practice. I believe that inability to connect theory to practice is due to many things including student level of engagement, how student's study, and the lack of opportunity to connect theory to practice prior to the field practicum. Many of the participants mentioned that they had not had an opportunity to connect theory to practice. As a result of their comments, I was led to create a project designed to provide students with authentic learning experiences in an engaging and education environment throughout the entire social work curriculum which would offer students the opportunity to connect theory to practice from the time they begin their social work courses. This project also has the side benefit of bringing social work education up to date with current technology.

Summary

In Section 1, the researcher discussed the pervasive issue identified in social work education which is student inability to connect theory to practice in the field practicum. Despite research which has identified teaching and learning strategies to improve student ability to connect theory to practice, a review of literature supports the problem continues to exist. The researcher conducted a qualitative study examining student perspectives

related to the issue of student inability to connect theory to practice and learned valuable information which can be used to eradicate the issue in Section 2. The researcher conducted interviews and observations in order to answer the research question, "What do social work students perceive are the issues related to the connection of theory to practice within the field practicum?" A detailed description of students' responses was provided. In Section 3, the researcher will outline the project involving a simulated learning environment that can be accessed from student's cell phones, tablets, or computers.

Section 3: The Project

Research indicated a well-documented concern related to social work students' inability to integrate theory and practice (Bogo et al., 2017; Larrison & Korr, 2013; Lee & Fortune, 2013a, 2013b; Molina et al., 2018; Reupert, 2009; Sieminski & Seden, 2011; Singh, 2010; Sunarich & Rowan, 2017; Wayne et al., 2010; Williamson & Chang, 2009). This lack of ability was also supported in the current study. Findings indicated the need to strengthen students' ability to connect theory to practice. Authentic learning experiences have been shown to positively impact the ability to connect theory to practice in the fields of education and nursing (Ayala, 2009; Beckem & Watkins, 2012; Beleslin, Sindic, & Vujic, 2015; Lea & Callaghan, 2011; Rogers, 2011). Beleslin et al. (2015) observed that authentic learning experiences strengthen the integration of theoretical knowledge and practice. There is also an increased need and desire to provide authentic learning experiences in social work education through the use of technology (Ayala, 2009; Beckem & Watkins, 2012; Bland & Tobbell, 2016; Lea & Callaghan, 2011). Authentic learning can occur through the use of simulations in social work curricula in blended and online learning environments, making technology a potential solution with many benefits. Today's students are so comfortable with technology that they are considered digital natives (Ayala, 2009). Because technology plays a significant role in the lives of students, it would be beneficial to use available technology to engage students and increase their ability to connect theory to practice.

The project developed based on the study findings is a curriculum plan to provide simulated authentic learning experiences to support the connection of theory to practice. The project incorporates a simulated learning environment in the social work curriculum to allow students to connect theory to practice with their first exposure to field work. The simulated learning environment will be used to provide learning activities for the students, which will require them to connect theory to practice in a controlled and safe environment. I recommended implementation of the project in an introductory social work course, but the project could be adjusted for all social work courses. A copy of the project can be found in Appendix A. In Section 3, I discuss the curriculum plan designed to address the pervasive issue of students' inability to connect theory to practice in the practicum setting. The use of technology in the social work curriculum could provide instructors a way to strengthen students' recall of theories learned in class and decrease the gap in students' ability to connect theory to practice in the field practicum.

Rationale

Immersive learning simulations are designed to combine pedagogy, virtual reality, and fun to engage students and support learning (Beckem & Watkins, 2012). Virtual environments and simulated learning are currently used in health care education and teacher education to improve learning outcomes and support the integration of theory and practice (Al-Ghareeb & Cooper, 2016; Berragan, 2014; Bland & Tobbell, 2016; Davis, Kimble, & Gunby, 2014; Haracz, Arrighi, & Joyce, 2015; Hayden, Smiley, Alexander, Kardong-Edgren, & Jeffries, 2014; Irwin & Coutts, 2015; Jung, Lee, Kang, & Kim, 2017; Kaddoura, Vandyke, Smallwood, & Gonzalez, 2016; Kunst, Mitchell, & Johnston, 2017;

Lejonqvist, Eriksson, & Meretoja, 2016; Page-Cutrara, K, 2014; Rogers, 2011; Sundler et al., 2015; Thidemann & Soderhamn, 2013; Warren, Luctkar-Flude, Godfrey, & Lukewich, 2016; Yeung, Dubrowski, & Carnahan, 2013). Second Life and Toolwire are companies producing simulations for learning. The digital media simulations designed by Toolwire include an instructional design involving six primary building blocks: a context for the story, interactions, an outline of the learning objectives, the use of virtual mentors to communicate key information, indicators that gauge student knowledge and move the student forward to formative assessments or remediation, and summative assessments (Toolwire, 2018). Data analysis in the current study showed that students are not retaining information related to theories learned. This could significantly impact their ability to connect theory to practice. By providing repeated exposure to theories, practice behaviors, and skills needed in the field of social work through simulated learning environments, the project could reinforce learning and improve the ability to connect theory to practice in the field practicum.

It would be easy to incorporate simulations into social work curricula beginning with introductory social work courses and moving to more advanced courses. Instructors could begin with simple scenarios based on social work core competencies and progress toward simulations involving social work theories, interviewing techniques, and assessment skills as the students show mastery of the skills required in the field. Students learn best when they have a connection to their instructors, a connection to peers, the opportunity to collaborate, and the ability to understand the concepts they are learning (Bland & Tobbell, 2016; de Boer, Campbell, & Hovey, 2011; Luchoomun, McLuckie, &

van Wesel, 2010). In a blended or online social work course, simulations provide support for collaborative learning, increased communication, increased self-esteem, and improved judgment and understanding of course curriculum (Bland & Tobbell, 2016; Bogo et al., 2017; Rogers, 2011).

Social work education includes a practicum or internship designed to demonstrate a student's ability to connect theory to practice prior to graduation. Research indicated that practicums and internships limit learning experiences and place increased pressure on students to perform (Lea & Callaghan, 2011). Digital media simulations can be used to develop a variety of practice situations providing students multiple opportunities for exposure to many different social work learning experiences (Toolwire, 2018). The practice simulations might relieve stress associated with the practicum experience as the simulations are a safe environment for mistakes to occur (Beckem & Watkins, 2012). Benefits of simulation use have been well documented as having a positive impact on learning (Al-Ghareeb & Cooper, 2016; Bland & Tobbell, 2016; Bogo et al., 2017; Sunarich & Rowan, 2017; Sundler et al., 2015). Simulations appear to be a good means of impacting students' ability to connect theory to practice while increasing students' levels of engagement and understanding of social work concepts, skills, core values, and theories.

Review of the Literature

The use of simulations and authentic learning experiences in adult education to support learning and improve the connection of theory to practice is not new. Virtual environments and simulated learning are used in health care education to enhance

learning outcomes and improve the integration of theory and practice (Al-Ghareeb & Cooper, 2016; Berragan, 2014; Bland & Tobbell, 2016; Davis et al., 2014; Haracz et al., 2015; Hayden et al., 2014; Irwin & Coutts, 2015; Jung et al., 2017; Kaddoura et al., 2016; Kunst et al., 2017; Lejonqvist et al., 2016; Page-Cutrara, K, 2014; Rogers, 2011; Sundler et al., 2015; Thidemann & Soderhamn, 2013; Warren, Luctkar-Flude, Godfrey, & Lukewich, 2016; Yeung et al., 2013). Students begin learning social work theories and skills upon entrance into a social work program. Students also begin learning skills needed to interact with clients on different levels. Khalili (2015) stated that simulations help students integrate theoretical knowledge and skills with problem solving, critical thinking, and judgement to provide holistic care. Simulation has been used in nursing education to incorporate technology into a theory-focused curriculum and maintain a human component (Mompoint-Williams, Brooks, Lee, Watts, & Moss, 2014; Warren et al., 2016). Lejonqvist et al. (2016) noted that computer-assisted simulation has been used in nursing education since the 1980s to train students and ensure clinical competence through role play and case studies. Chau et al. (2013) found that an evaluation of students' learning experiences in a virtual or simulated setting promoted the achievement of learning outcomes. Simulation-based learning has been found to significantly increase students' retention of knowledge, communication skills, and empowerment (Jung et al., 2017; Kaddoura et al., 2016). Sunarich and Rowan (2017) used simulations in social work courses and found that students' ability to connect theory to practice was supported and student learning outcomes were enhanced. Many of the participants in the current study reported that they did not have much opportunity to practice social work skills or

connect theory to practice prior to their practicum experience. Providing exposure to realistic client situations through simulations will give social work students the opportunity to practice their skills and connect theory to practice prior to working with actual clients. Warren et al. (2016) shared that simulated learning promotes students' decision-making, knowledge, skills, and confidence in a safe, controlled environment.

Authentic learning experiences are also being used in education to provide integrated learning experiences and improve the connection of theory to practice (Beleslin et al., 2015; Hopwood, Rooney, Boud, & Kelly, 2016; Irwin & Coutts, 2015; Jung et al., 2017; Kaddoura et al., 2016; Kumar & Antonenko, 2014; Warren et al., 2016). The use of simulations in learning influences pedagogy and potentiates a learner's capabilities (Irwin & Coutts, 2015; Satterfield, 2015). Thidemann and Soderhamn (2013) noted that authentic learning experiences impact the observers of the experience as well. Many students who observe a simulated learning experience reported they felt they became a part of the scenario (Thidemann & Soderhamn, 2013). Wright and Hibbert (2015) discussed how simulations and authentic learning experiences allow for the use of theories to inform practice. Educators can tailor the design of the authentic learning experience around specific concepts, theories, and skills (Wright & Hibbert, 2015). Authentic learning experiences have also been shown to lead to positive learning outcomes (Al-Ghareeb & Cooper, 2016; Davis et al., 2014; Jung et al., 2017; Kaddoura et al., 2016; Lejonqvist et al., 2016; Lendahls & Oscarsson, 2017; Milner-Bolotin, 2017; Sadler, 2012). Simulation and authentic learning present an opportunity to integrate different aspects of the curriculum in an environment where students feel safe to make

mistakes (Hopwood et al., 2016; Khalili, 2015; Lejonqvist et al., 2016; Lendahls & Oscarsson, 2017). Aertsen, Jaspaert, and Van Gorp (2013) found that students gained deeper insights of theoretical concepts as a result of a simulated learning project. Milner-Bolotin

(2017) observed that computer-generated simulations are highly accessible and allow for extended learning outside of the classroom. However, social work education has only recently included the use of simulation to support learning, improve the connection of theory to practice, and enhance student engagement.

Educational technology provides students with a framework that assists in the connection of theory, practice, and method (Kumar & Antonenko, 2014). Digital media simulations provide learning platforms created to address the needs of students, educators, and administrators. The learning environments are multimodal and personalized, can be use on-demand, provide opportunities to motivate and encourage students, offer an active way to learn, and are user friendly (Beckem & Watkins, 2012; Davis et al., 2014; Robinson & Dearmon, 2013). Simulation-based education includes innovative teaching and learning strategies related to theory and practice (Bland & Tobbell, 2016). Simulated learning also has the potential to impact learning in unforeseen situations that call for the use of advanced skills and critical thinking (Arthur, Levett-Jones, & Kable, 2013; Berragan, 2014; Mills et al., 2014; Sundler et al., 2015). The flexibility of simulation use is one reason why it is a good fit for social work education. Simulated learning is self- paced, synchronous or asynchronous, and interactive, and it reinforces key learning concepts and requires the application of prior knowledge.

Simulations can also be accessed from any mobile device wherever there is Internet access (Beckem & Watkins, 2012). Overall, the research indicated that the use of simulated and authentic learning experiences in health care and education programs increased students' ability to connect theory to practice, promoted their skill development, improved their self-esteem, and provided an innovative way to deliver course content (Beckem & Watkins, 2012).

To reach saturation in this literature review, I used the following databases: ERIC, EBSCO, SocINDEX, Dissertations, SAGE, Thoreau, and multiple books. The following key words were used: *social work practice*, *theory and practice*, *theory to practice*, *simulation*, *simulated learning*, *authentic learning*, *social work education*, *teaching*, *instruction*, and *educational technology*. The current research and peer-reviewed literature revealed consistent agreement related to the impact of simulated and/or authentic learning experiences in improving students' ability to connect theory to practice in a practicum or field setting. The conceptual framework of empowerment and social constructivism also supported the use of simulated learning. Aspects of empowerment theory include critical reflection, awareness, and understanding (Perkins, 2010). Through simulation learning, students will gain understanding of social work theories, including empowerment theory. Students will also use critical reflection during and after the simulations. Students will also create their own understanding of the knowledge gained during the simulations, which is a key component of social constructivism theory (see Fire & Casstevens, 2013).

Project Description

For the project, I developed a curriculum plan that incorporates simulated learning into social work curriculum which is intended to support learning and enhance student ability in the connection of theory and practice. This project also has the potential to increase student engagement and improve social work education overall. The use of simulations should be incorporated into social work curriculum at the earliest point possible. The Introduction to Social Work course is a student's first exposure to social work, the core competencies, values, ethics, theories, and skills. Introduction to social work also provides students with a historical perspective of the evolution of field of social work and exposure to the impact different backgrounds and experiences have on coping skills and resiliency. The use of simulations to enhance learning is very popular and well researched in the nursing field and nursing students have indicated simulations increased their self-confidence and resulted in a significant increase in cognitive knowledge (Lewis & Ciak, 2011). The use of educational technology in Ed. D programs resulted in stronger connections between theories learned and their practice (Kumar & Antonenko, 2014). There is every reason to believe the incorporation of simulation in social work will be successful as well.

Although simulated learning environments appear to be a good fit for social work education, it would be beneficial to involve the stakeholders prior to any implementation of the technology. The stakeholders to involve in the planning and implementation of digital media simulations include the students, the instructors, the technology department, and the university administration. Social work programs are typically small and involve a

few hundred students. It would be very easy to send out an email to all the social work

students requesting input regarding the use of simulations in the learning process. It

would also be possible to hold a town meeting with students, instructors, tech support

representatives, and the administration as a way to dialogue about concerns, benefits, and

to address questions about the technology. Separate meetings between the technology

department, administration, and instructors should be held to discuss the specifics of

implementation; what will be the timeline for implementation, will there be a specific

mandate to include simulations in curriculum, will training be offered, will support for

instructors be provided? All of these issues and questions should be dealt with prior to the

implementation of the technology.

The technology selected for the purposes of this project is Toolwire's ® Digital

Media Simulation. Toolwire ® offers two types of virtual reality/simulations known as

Smart Scenarios and Learnscapes. Each option allows for student and faculty input and

observation as well as photo realistic worlds and experiences which include interaction

with video characters, day-in-the-life experiences, and authentic natural assessments

(Toolwire, 2018). These technologies could easily be included into several social work

courses as a way to support learning, enhance student engagement, and improve student's

overall education.

Toolwire's ® digital media simulations can be integrated into any Learning

Management System (LMS). Students and instructors would have access to the

simulations through a link within the LMS (Beckem & Watkins, 2012; Toolwire, 2018).

However, if the use of digital media simulations is going to be limited to the social work

program, the more cost-effective option would be to generate a code allowing students to access a link embedded into the LMS (Toolwire, 2018). The university does not have to pay the cost of full integration and can keep track of how often the technology is used to determine effectiveness and value. A third option for integration is available for use on a course by course basis. Training and 24-hour support are provided by Toolwire ® through their Learner Advocacy Team which deals with security, accessibility, customer support, and usability (Beckem & Watkins, 2012).

Despite reaching out and involving the stakeholders in the development and implementation of the new technology, there may be obstacles and resistance. The Toolwire ® website does not outline the actual cost of the digital media simulation integration which would suggest cost may be an obstacle. It may be necessary to implement the use of simulations on a small scale perhaps within a few courses as a way to increase excitement about the tool and to eventually sustain the use of the technology. Toolwire ® has partnered with Pearson to allow access codes to be bundled with course textbooks or simply purchased directly from Pearson (Pearson PLC, 2014). This would allow the cost of the simulations to become a technology fee and give the university time to evaluate the effectiveness of the technology before using valuable resources to integrate the technology into the LMS.

Educators continue to resist the use of technology in the classroom despite the many advantages technology offers (Hicks, 2011). Research supports there are several reasons educators resist the use of technology, some reasons include the fear of appearing incompetent or inadequate in front of their students, they are intimidated by the

technology, they have not received proper training regarding the use of the technology, or they do not see the benefit of the technology (Hicks, 2011). To address educator resistance, training will be provided to all social work faculty regarding the use of digital media simulation. After all social work faculty have been trained, educators willing to incorporate the technology into their course curriculum will be connected with the Toolwire ® Learner Advocacy Team in order to develop simulations for use in class. Perhaps the combination of training and 24-hour support will relieve any fears the educators may have and help build confidence. In terms of helping the educators see the benefit of the simulations or as a way to help them make sense of the inclusion of the technology, perhaps as the educators begin to use simulations in class they will see the benefits over time. Research suggests making sense of something new is an active process involving experience, ascribing meaning to the experience, and communication (Ford et al., 2008). It might be a good idea to encourage the faculty using the simulation software to meet on a weekly basis to provide support to each other and to discuss the benefits and challenges associated with digital media simulations. If the educators are well trained and have support, there is a greater likelihood the implementation of the new technology will be maintained and sustained (Ford et al., 2008).

In order to sustain the new technology, it will also be necessary to develop a plan of action identifying significant resources available to sustain the technology and strategies to deal with factors which may impact the ability to sustain the technology. The institution selected to pilot this project is a local university with a thriving social work program. The three most significant resources available at the institution to sustain the

use of simulations are internet access, ample training locations, and strong technical and technology support. The institution has an Office of Teaching and Learning with Technology. The department is open during regular business hours and has a help desk providing 24-hour assistance for minor issues. In addition to the help desk, professional development is offered online and on campus, and technicians will assist faculty with the inclusion of technology into course delivery. Educators who are well trained in the use of new technology and have additional technical support are more likely to incorporate technology into curriculum (Hicks, 2011). The institution provides free internet access to all students and faculty through the use of individual passwords based on student and work IDs. The university also has several computer labs available for use as training locations for students and faculty. The training locations would provide educators the opportunity experiment with and examine all the possibilities for teaching and learning available through the use of simulations. Research indicates it is important to allow educators exposure to new technology as a way to examine and experiment how technologies can and cannot be utilized effectively in the classroom (Harris & Rea, 2009).

Resources like internet access, training, and technology support are important for sustaining the use of new technology but consideration also needs to be given to those factors which could also impact sustainability. The factors identified as having the potential to impact sustainability of simulation use in social work curriculum are faculty training, technology support, institutional support, and funding. It is important to have the right kind of support from the institution (Laureate Education, 2013). Institutional

support includes more than just support for the implementation of a new technology. The right kind of support includes providing the guidelines or a directive requiring the use of simulations within the curriculum, assisting with a budgetary strategy to provide funding for the technology, faculty training, and funding for additional technology support if needed. It is one thing to agree that technology should be incorporated into curriculum but the institution needs to back that support with action to assist in the development, implementation, and sustaining of technology as well. Toolwire® also provides technical and technology support on a 24-hour basis to students and faculty. The additional support available through Toolwire® is a bonus and should impact sustainability of simulation use in a positive way.

The use of simulations within an introductory social work course would be a great way to support learning objectives and keep students engaged. Students would enter a virtual environment and be presented with several doors or rooms to enter. Behind each door is a significant person or event. For example, students would be able to interact with a virtual Jane Addams, one of the founders of Hull House who conducted significant work with immigrants and is considered one of the first social workers (Adams et al., 2009). The simulations will allow the students to ask historical social workers questions and begin forming an understanding of the historical development of social work. Once the students have interacted with the historical figures, they will then enter simulations in which they are the clients. These simulations can be recreations of historical events, practice situations, portals discussing relevant theories used in social work, or current social justice issues. The students will experience racial tension, stereotyping, class

discrimination as a way to identify their personal biases and also experience what it is like to need assistance. The core values and competencies will be identified within the simulated learning environment. Students will also be exposed to the behavioral theories, developmental theories, and theories specifically used in social work practice such as the systems theory during this portion of the simulations. Once the students have progressed through different social work settings as clients, they will then become the professional social worker and provide services to clients individually, as part of a community agency, and then advocate from an organizational point of view. Each simulation will incorporate the connection of theory and practice once the student begins engaging "clients" as a professional social worker. Simulations combine pedagogy and fun to create very engaging learning environments (Beckem & Watkins, 2012). The use of technology such as simulation also provides students with flexibility as the learning can occur outside of the classroom at the student's convenience. The students can enter the simulations from their home, computers, iPads, phones, and basically any location with internet access. The students will also have the ability to enter the simulations alone or in groups and as often as they would like. Students report higher levels of satisfaction when learning is asynchronous and includes regular participation (de Boer et al., 2011). The students would also be placed in small groups and permitted to select from a list of historical events of significance, theories of importance, and practice situations. Each group will conduct research related to the event, theory, or practice selected and then enter a simulation to provide a group presentation related to their selected simulation. When compared to traditional lecture, team-based learning improved student performance,

increased cognitive skills, and developed communication skills (Allen et al., 2013). It stands to reason the combination of team-based learning and simulations involving slide presentations, video clips of historical events, audio recordings of historical figures discussing their theories, social justice activities, or impact on social work, and virtual reality experiences would provide a very stimulating and engaging learning environment for students who are very comfortable with technology.

The class as a whole will engage in an ongoing second simulation as a group and as individuals. The simulation will be self-paced and include encounters designed to reinforce the learning objectives as they apply their knowledge of social work core competencies, values, theories, code of ethics, and provide social work services to clients of differing backgrounds within different social work practice settings. The use of simulations allows for teachable moments that reinforce student knowledge. Instructors are provided with the results from key interactions at the end of each experience as a way to assess student learning and levels of engagement (Beckem & Watkins, 2012).

Throughout the course, students will provide feedback during presentations, during simulations, and after presentations and simulations. Collaborative learning and peer assessment have been shown to be very effective. The use of peer feedback supports learning and encourages student engagement in course curriculum (Luchoomun et al., 2010). The students will assess each other and submit evaluation forms to the instructor. The evaluations will assist the instructor in assessment of each student. The ongoing dialogue and feedback will provide students the opportunity to engage in learning through questions and feedback. This brings in the conceptual frameworks of

empowerment, the empowerment theory, and social constructivism as the students are impacting their own learning experiences and empowering each other within the simulated learning environment and through their feedback.

Project Evaluation Plan

The final stage of implementing any project that includes changes to curriculum or instruction is similar to that of implementing a new program and that requires a project or program evaluation. Cafferella (2013) indicated, "Program evaluation is most often defined as a process used to determine whether the design and delivery of a program were effective and whether the proposed outcomes were met" (p. 328). Therefore, a systematic outcome- based evaluation of the proposed project would be the best way to determine the impact of participating in the simulated learning environment. If the evaluation supports the students are moving toward becoming proficient in connecting theory to practice, then transfer of learning has occurred or is occurring and project outcomes are being met. If the evaluation shows no improvement then the project will need to be re-evaluated. The data collected during a program evaluation is important for funding and also as a means to show stakeholders that their time and effort has been worthwhile. Finally, solid program evaluations or, in this circumstance, project evaluations also address the issue of accountability and provide information to support expansion (Cafferella, 2013). Clearly, a good summative evaluation provides useful feedback from the students, stakeholders, instructors, and all those involved.

Guiding Questions

1. Did the simulated/authentic learning environment assist students in the application of theory to practice?

2. Did students acquire knowledge enabling them to identify social work values and core competencies?

3. Were students able to reflect on their experiences?

Data Collection Strategies

Several strategies and techniques are available for the collection of data during an evaluation (Cafferella, 2013). The data collection strategies for the simulated learning project evaluation include the results of the exams given over the course of the semester, a questionnaire, and anecdotal data collected from class discussions and student notes. The data collected from the exams and will account for skills, knowledge, and achievement of learning objectives (Cafferella, 2013). The data will also be used for accountability as most of the funding for the project may come from grants or funds from the departmental budget. The questionnaires will be used to collect data pertaining to student reactions, learning, and use of new knowledge and skills (Cafferella, 2013). The class discussions and student notes and will provide data pertaining to the observations and interactions of the students and the instructor. This data can be collected over time and is also important to gauge project outcomes and objectives, learning objectives, and accountability of the project in its entirety.

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Data Collection Tools

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Method A

The tests are a formal method for the collection of data.

Purpose. The exams will provide quantitative data related to achievement- based learning objectives. The information provided by the process will help identify if the students are learning the core competencies, values, and theories important to social work practice, but more importantly it will provide evidence that the simulations, authentic leaning experiences, and curriculum are meeting the needs of the students or needs to be changed in order to better meet the needs of the students.

Guiding Questions. This method of data collection will address the following guiding questions: Did the simulated/authentic learning environment assist students in the application of theory to practice? Did the simulations teach the students the core competencies, values, and theories related to social work practice? Were students able to reflect on their experiences? The proposed project involves incorporating simulated learning experiences in order to assist students with the ability to connect theory to practice. If the students are not learning, then the simulations are a waste of their time. The data collected will also help to identify changes that need to be made in regards to curriculum and teaching strategies.

Implementation. The exams will be administered by the instructor of the course. The students will take the four exams over the course of a 16- week semester. Passing grades on all exams are required to maintain an acceptable grade point average. The exams are also the standard required for accountability and to provide evidence supporting the use of simulated learning environments.

Data Analysis. A pie chart of the distribution of scores that are separated into three categories representing values, core competencies, and theories will be used to

display the results of the exams. Lodico et al. (2010) stated, "Pie charts are typically used for variables that have been measured and the responses separated into categories" (p. 243). The pie chart will provide a good visual of the percentages of the scores for each category. A table will also be created to show the means and standard deviations for the exam scores. The table will show the scores collected from the exams.

Reporting Strategy. A power point presentation in conjunction with a verbal presentation of the results will be shared with the Director of the Social Work Department, the chair of the department, and the dean of the college. A written report of the results will be sent via email to the president of the university.

Method B

The questionnaire is a formal method of data collection. The questionnaire will be comprehensive and will include the course content, instructor skills, questions regarding the simulated learning environment, and the overall class experience (Cafferella, 2013).

Purpose. The questionnaire will give the students an opportunity to share their opinions regarding the instructor, educational strategies used, course content, and the simulations (Cafferella, 2013). The information provided by the students will assist in developing the simulations and also help identify areas for improvement.

Guiding questions. This method of data collection will address the following guiding question: Did the students reflect on their experiences? This form of data collection provides the students with the opportunity to impact the entire social work program by sharing their experiences. The questionnaire also provides the students a way to reflect on their growth throughout the semester.

Implementation. The questionnaire will be administered prior to the completion of the course. The instructor will administer the questionnaire upon completion of the final exam. This will allow for feedback specific to the simulated learning environment and the course in its entirety (Cafferella, 2013). It may be necessary to administer the questionnaires after each simulated learning experience which would be prior to the students' completion of the course. This information will be used in the same manner; as a method to continue improving the simulated learning experiences and make needed curriculum changes.

Data analysis. A frequency chart will be used to display student responses and as a way to analyze the quantitative data collected from the questionnaire. Common themes will be identified in the written responses and a summary of those responses will be used to analyze the qualitative data collected.

Reporting strategy. This information will be added to the power point and verbal presentation given to the university staff and administration. A written report of these results will also be sent via email to the president of the university.

Method C

Class discussions and student notes will provide an informal method of data collection pertaining to the observations and interactions of the students and instructor.

Purpose. The data obtained from the class discussions and student notes will provide valuable feedback regarding the knowledge acquired. The students and the instructor will have the opportunity to share their thoughts and perspectives related to simulated and authentic learning strengths and weaknesses. Since the students contribute

funds in terms of tuition, it is important to give them the opportunity to share their opinions in an effort to create the most productive learning environment possible.

Guiding questions. This method of data collection will address the following guiding questions: Did the simulated learning environment translate into an improved ability to connect theory to practice for the students? Did the instructor provide support during the learning process? It is important to have information directly connected to the acquisition of social work practice skills as a means of accountability. The instructor and the director of the social work program need to know if the students are learning and retaining the curriculum. It is also important for the instructors to assess their role in the learning process. A successful social work education program translates into better prepared social work general practitioners.

Implementation. The class discussions and note taking will begin after the first simulated learning experience. Discussions will occur on a weekly basis and the instructor will actively participate as well as the students. The instructor and graduate assistant will take notes during the discussions for the purpose of data collection.

Data analysis. A content analysis of the discussion documents and notes will be done. Content related to the students and instructor's perceptions and reflections of their experiences in the simulated environment will be analyzed. The instructor will be looking for any and all information that can be utilized in order to improve the simulated learning experience for the students and give a clear picture of student learning outcomes.

Reporting strategy. A written report of the content analysis will be presented verbally to university staff and administration. A summary of the written report will be

added to the power point presentation and a copy of the written report will be emailed to the president of university.

Project Implications

The social change implications of the proposed project are difficult to quantify. Social work professionals assist individuals, groups, or communities in improving or restoring their ability to function or engage in social change as a way to improve conditions (NASW, 2018). Social work is social change in action. The proposed project has the potential to strengthen the knowledge base of social work students. Social work students with the ability to connect theory to practice should become practitioners who are better able to assist their clients to engage in social change. Social work practitioners empower clients to improve their individual functioning, improve their surroundings, and advocate for change and social justice. This alone would impact social change at the local, state, national, and international levels and at the same time could also improve social work education at those levels as well.

Improved curriculum at the local level strengthens the social work program at the local university where the research was conducted. Practitioners with an increased ability to connect theory to practice will provide a higher quality of service within the community where the university is located, as well as, to the communities where those practitioners may choose to reside. Continued research to increase the credibility of the results of this study and proposed project will allow for generalization of the findings. This also impacts social work in a larger context as more social work programs begin to integrate simulated learning into their curriculums.

Simulations have proven to be very effective within nursing education as a way to support connecting theory to practice and increasing student engagement. The same potential exists to impact student ability to connect theory to practice in the field practicum within social work education. The use of simulations offers social work students the opportunity to practice using skills and knowledge in a safe environment. This ongoing exposure to connecting theory and practice could close the gap experienced by many students when in their field practicum. The potential growth and development for students and faculty indicates the benefits could impact social work education at the local, national, and global levels.

Summary

In Section 1, the researcher discussed and identified the pervasive issue in social work education which is student inability to connect theory to practice in the field practicum. A review of literature supported the problem continues to exist despite research. A study examining student perspectives related to the issue provided valuable information which can be used to eradicate the issue. In Section 2, the researcher outlined the selection of a case study design to conduct the proposed research. The researcher studied a single issue and produced a rich description of the issue through the interviews and observations conducted at a local university. The methodology justified the selection of a case study was discussed along with access to the site and participants, participant selection, data collection methods, transcription method was discussed, and a summary of findings was presented. The researcher outlined the proposed project designed to address the continued issue of student inability to connect theory to practice in the field practicum

within Section 3. A review of literature was presented. The researcher also provided

information related to the implementation of the proposed project and presented a plan to

evaluate the project. The researcher then discussed implications of the project in terms of

ethical considerations, sustainability, and overall outcomes. Within Section 4, the

researcher will provide reflections and conclusions regarding the proposed projects

strengths and limitations, suggestions for alternative solutions to the issue of student

inability to connect theory to practice in the field practicum, and personal reflections

related to the doctoral process.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Project Strengths and Limitations

Implementing a curriculum plan involving simulated learning environments appears to be a good fit for social work education. One strength of the project is that Toolwire's ® digital media simulations can be integrated into any Learning Management System (LMS). Students and instructors will have access to the simulations through a link within the LMS (Beckem & Watkins, 2012; Toolwire, 2018). Toolwire's® also provides additional options for access. For example, if the use of digital media simulations is going to be limited to the social work program, the more cost- effective option would be to generate a code allowing students to access a link embedded into the LMS (Toolwire, 2018). These particular options mean the university does not have to pay the cost of full integration and can keep track of how often the technology is used to determine effectiveness and value. A third option for integration is available for use on a course by course basis. Training and 24-hour support are provided by Toolwire ® through their Learner Advocacy Team which deals with security, accessibility, customer support, and usability (Beckem & Watkins, 2012).

A second strength of the project relates to the flexibility the project provides to the students and faculty. As stated previously, simulations can be accessed on demand because they are multi-modal (Beckem & Watkins, 2012). This flexibility means that students can complete many assignments from the comfort of their own homes. A curriculum plan with simulations involving practice situations could be completed as

group activities in class or outside of the classroom making it ideal for hybrid and online courses as well.

Further, the biggest strength of a curriculum plan using simulated learning environments in the classroom is the impact simulated and authentic learning has been shown to have on increasing student ability to connect theory to practice and lead to positive learning outcomes (Al-Ghareeb & Cooper, 2016; Arthur et al., 2013; Berragan, 2013; Berragan, 2014; Bland & Tobbell, 2016; Bogo et al., 2017; David et al., 2014; Dunnington, 2014; Hayden et al., 2014; Mills et al., 2014; Robinson & Dearmon, 2013; Sunarich & Rowan, 2017). According to Bland and Tobbell (2016), students were able to describe how a simulated learning environment enabled them to used theory in connection with their clinical practice. The shared authentic learning environment also allows students the opportunity to construct their own meaning and knowledge from experience (Fire & Casstevens, 2013). Social constructivism as a form of learning occurs when students actively develop their own understanding through interaction and are the primary focus of the learning experience (Sthapornnanon et al., 2009). The proposed project utilizes the theoretical framework of social constructivism. Student inability to connect theory to practice is a long-standing issue within social work education (Larrison & Korr, 2013; Lee & Fortune, 2013a, 2013b; Reupert, 2009; Sieminski & Seden, 2011; Singh, 2010; Wayne et al., 2010; Williamson & Chang, 2009). This project has the potential to impact that gap and even reduce or eliminate the issue of student inability to connect theory to practice.

As stated previously, a curriculum plan using simulated learning environments appears to be a good fit for social work education. However, the use of simulations does have limitations. The use of simulations could never replace interaction with clients because human beings' concerns, responses, and life experiences are very complex (Dunnington, 2014; Sundler et al., 2015). It is also important to recognize that simulated learning may not be experienced as fully authentic learning despite the advanced technology that is available (Bland & Tobbell, 2016; Sundler et al., 2015). It is not known if simulated learning will, in fact, impact student ability to connect theory to practice. It is possible that the use of simulations will have no impact on student learning outcomes.

Another potential limitation of the project is the cost of the technology. The Toolwire ® website does not outline the actual cost of the digital media simulation integration which would suggest cost may be an obstacle. It may be necessary to implement the use of simulations on a small scale perhaps within a few courses as a way to increase excitement about the tool and to eventually sustain the use of the technology. Toolwire ® has partnered with Pearson to allow access codes to be bundled with course textbooks or simply purchased directly from Pearson (Pearson PLC, 2014). This would allow the cost of the simulations to become a technology fee and give the university time to evaluate the effectiveness of the technology before using valuable resources to integrate the technology into the LMS.

Finally, educators continue to resist the use of technology in the classroom despite the many advantages technology offers (Hicks, 2011). Research supports there are

several reasons educators resist the use of technology, some reasons include the fear of appearing incompetent or inadequate in front of their students, they are intimidated by the technology, they have not received proper training regarding the use of the technology, or they do not see the benefit of the technology (Davis et al., 2014; Hicks, 2011). To address educator resistance, training will be provided to all social work faculty regarding the use of digital media simulation. After all social work faculty have been trained, educators willing to incorporate the technology into their course curriculum will be connected with the Toolwire ® Learner Advocacy Team in order to develop simulations for use in class. Perhaps the combination of training and 24-hour support will relieve any fears the educators may have and help build confidence. The educators who choose not to incorporate simulations into their curriculum may change their minds once they begin hearing students discuss their experiences with the simulations. Those educators may also see the benefits of using the technology once their peers share their experiences as well. Research suggests making sense of something new is an active process involving experience, ascribing meaning to the experience, and communication (Ford et al., 2008). It might be a good idea to encourage the faculty using the simulation software to meet on a weekly basis to provide support to each other and to discuss the benefits and challenges associated with digital media simulations. If the educators are well trained and have support, there is a greater likelihood the implementation of the new technology will be maintained and sustained (Ford et al., 2008).

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

Data analysis confirmed students' inability to connect theory to practice. However, the origin of that disconnect was not identified. There could be a number of factors contributing to students' inability to connect theory to practice. Research indicated that an alternative approach to increase students' ability to connect theory to practice would be to restructure the field practicum process (Molina et al., 2018). The current process involves locating agencies with qualified supervisors to oversee the student experience during the practicum. It is not always possible to locate licensed social workers to provide the supervision needed in a field practicum, which can result in gaps in the student's education. If the process of locating agencies involved more training for all field placement supervisors, this could impact student knowledge.

An additional alternative would be to create opportunities for the field supervisors and the university faculty to work together at the field sites. This could not only increase the knowledge of site supervisors and students but also give faculty members the opportunity to learn from the site supervisors and students as well. Although there is some research related to team teaching involving faculty and site supervisors, there is no research related to the current field practicum process. Additional research related to both of these alternatives may provide information that could improve social work education programs and increase scholarly learning on the part of social work educators and students.

Scholarship

Prior to beginning my doctoral journey, I never thought about scholarship, scholarly writing, or what a scholar-practitioner looks like. As a result of the research for this study and the development of the project, I am capable of identifying a need, conducting a study, and identifying potential solutions to address the need. I have learned to support my thoughts and opinions with credible sources. I understand the importance of protecting participants, respecting the IRB process, and conducting credible and reliable research. I have become a scholar-practitioner who is currently in the process of getting ready to follow up on the research conducted in this study. I want to strengthen the findings of my research and evaluate my project. These things matter to me in a way that I could not have imagined when I began this journey. I want to make a difference in social work education. I want to make a permanent impact on the identified gap in students' ability to connect theory to practice in their practicum (see Bogo et al., 2017; Larrison & Korr, 2013; Lee & Fortune, 2013a, 2013b; Reupert, 2009; Sieminski & Seden, 2011; Singh, 2010; Sunarich & Rowan, 2017; Wayne et al., 2010; Williamson & Chang, 2009). Scholarship has become a way of life not because I had to conduct research to develop my project, but because I am now teaching at a university and have students of my own.

Project Development and Evaluation

My professors encouraged the development of an idea for the doctoral study early in the program. I feel I have been working on the doctoral study for nearly five years. When I began researching topics, I had no idea what I was looking for, and then I

stumbled on the issue of students' inability to connect theory to practice within the field practicum (see Bogo et al., 2017; Larrison & Korr, 2013; Lee & Fortune, 2013a, 2013b; Reupert, 2009; Sieminski & Seden, 2011; Singh, 2010; Sunarich & Rowan, 2017; Wayne et al., 2010; Williamson & Chang, 2009). As a field practicum instructor, I had firsthand knowledge of the issue because I had supervised over 50 students. I began researching the topic and noticed a common thread in the research. Although the topic of students' inability to connect theory to practice in the field practicum had been studied for nearly 30 years, no one had focused on the student perspective. Once I had selected the topic for my research, I began researching whether the issue existed in other disciplines. What I learned was that nursing students and student teachers had the same problem connecting theory to practice (see Ayala, 2009; Beckem & Watkins, 2012; Lea & Callaghan, 2011; Rogers, 2011). I began researching how scholars in those fields attempted to close the gap for their students, and my research kept coming back to authentic learning experiences and experiential learning. The research supported simulated learning environments as a means of strengthening the connection of theory to practice in nursing education and teacher education (Al-Ghareeb & Cooper, 2016; Ayala, 2009; Beckem & Watkins, 2012; Berragan, 2014; Lea & Callaghan, 2011; Rogers, 2011; Sundler et al., 2015). I began developing a project using simulated learning environments within social work education. Based on the research, simulated learning appears to be the best way to engage students in the material and provide authentic learning experiences prior to the field practicum experience

Leadership and Change

When it comes to leadership and change, I believe by incorporating technology into social work curriculum social work education will be impacted world-wide. We live in a technology-based society and our students seem to always be connected either through their cell phones, computers, or tablets. The social work department I teach within is currently in the process of offering our bachelor level courses completely online. We are also developing a proposal for an online master level program. If my continued research results in supporting the use of simulated learning to increase student ability to connect theory to practice, then our social work program will be the first to offer curriculum that supports simulated learning environments for social work students in brick and mortar classrooms and online classrooms. The success of our use of simulated learning could result in a change in social work curriculum on a global level. This excites me as an educator and as a researcher. I am of the opinion that a social work student who is better prepared as a practitioner can impact social change on a larger level as well. Social work practitioners can take on leadership roles in their agencies, communities, and governments at the state and national levels. When I think about the potential for leadership and change by improved social work education, I get very excited.

Reflection on Importance of the Work

Scholarship

I began my doctoral journey five years ago. In my naivety, I believed I would complete the process in just over three years. I had not taken an academic course in

nearly 10 years and I was worried that I might not have the skills or ability to complete

not just the coursework but the doctoral study either. I did not consider myself to be a

scholar at all. I was very intimidated by those cohorts who seemed very comfortable with

terms like scholarly writing and credible sources. It did not take me long to learn how to

use the Walden library to find articles but I did struggle with figuring out the terms I

needed to use in order to locate the kinds of articles I needed. I cried every time I

submitted an assignment in my first course because I doubted my ability and skills.

However, my self-esteem and skills began to improve with each assignment. I began to

feel like a scholar and I was very eager to share my thoughts and opinions with my

cohort. Each time I received feedback from my instructor or cohort, I felt validated as a

scholar and as a person. I had been practicing social work for over 20 years when I began

working on my Ed.D. and felt very competent as a social worker but now I was seeing

myself as something else. I was becoming a scholar and that added a dimension to my

social work that I could not have anticipated. It also impacted how I spoke with people

and even argued with people. I read more articles about social work, politics, and many

other topics. When I engage in a discussion, I am informed about most of the topics and

can support my thoughts and opinions. I was not like that before I began this program. I

also learned that research can be exciting and informative. The doctoral study seemed

like a mountain that I could not climb when I first looked at the requirements. However, I

now know that the past five years gave me the tools and skills needed to complete the

study. More importantly, I understand on a different level the importance of the work I

did to complete this study. It is important on two levels. As a social work practitioner, I

am contributing to my field of study. As a scholar-practitioner, I am growing in my understanding of the impact that formal education has on my students. This has been a result of becoming a scholar. I proved to myself that I could write a proposal, get IRB approval, conduct research, and analyze that research. I was also able to develop a project designed to impact the findings of my research. The personal growth I have experienced as a scholar brings me great joy but I have also grown as a practitioner because of the growth I experienced as a scholar.

Practitioner

I have been practicing social work for nearly 28 years. Evidence based practice as a social worker is part of our core values and is supported by the NASW (CSWE, 2015; NASW, 2018). This process has strengthened my work as a practitioner because I am much more comfortable researching articles related to the different strategies and treatments available for use when working with a client or to develop new skills to improve my practice. Although this should have always been a priority for me, sometimes when one is working in the field, it is easier to rely on past experience than it is to conduct research to find new approaches. However, I have found the benefit of research to be far more important than I had given it credit in the past. I am also now an instructor myself and frequently find myself stressing the importance of research-based practice as an integral part of being a social work practitioner. Becoming a true scholar practitioner has brought me full circle as a social worker. I am more knowledgeable of current trends and changes in the practice of social work. I am also far more aware of policy issues that impact our client base and how to impact change at the policy level. I

have become a more politically active social work practitioner because of that increased knowledge which is in line with social work core values, ethics, and the practice behaviors outlined by the CSWE and NASW (CSWE, 2015; NASW, 2018).

Project Developer

Prior to this journey, when my co-workers and I discussed issues within our practice setting or community, our discussions were actually dreams that we wished we could accomplish. This is no longer a true statement. I now have the skills to evaluate a situation, develop an idea or concept, and move forward with that idea or concept as a way to positively impact change. I have the ability to develop projects that can meet the needs of my client base, community, and local or state policy. However, this journey has taught me more than the skills and tools required to develop a project; it has given me the confidence to actively seek the improvements and concepts that I identify. I understand the process of developing a project and how to involve stakeholders. I can put together presentations that outline a project from beginning to end and I have the confidence to share the information because it is backed by research. This is the biggest personal growth change since beginning the doctoral program. I know that my ideas, concepts, projects, and what I have to say is valuable and can make a difference. In many ways, this entire process has helped me find my voice as a social worker.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

I have touched on some of the implications of my research which include increased student engagement, positively impacting student ability to connect theory to practice in the field practicum and improving social work education and practice. I

believe all of these things to be true. By implementing my proposed project into the core social work curriculum and electives, students will be connecting theories and practice from the time that they enter a social work program. Simulated learning can be adapted for all classroom settings whether that is a traditional classroom, hybrid classroom or online classroom (Toolwire®, 2014). The options available for learning go beyond the application of theory and practice. Simulated learning environments and authentic/experiential learning can be applied to knowledge of social work core competencies, values, theories, and the NASW code of ethics as well. I genuinely believe that this is revolutionary in terms of the impact on social work education.

However, before simulated learning can be included on such a large scale, more research is needed. First and foremost, additional research is needed to add credibility and validity to the findings of the research I completed. I am currently in a position to conduct the same research at the university where I am employed. Regardless of whether that research supports the findings of this doctoral study, I plan to seek permission to incorporate simulated learning experiences into two different core social work classes so I can begin researching the possible impact on student ability to connect theory to practice. I see myself conducting research on this issue for the next several years because I believe positively impacting student ability to connect theory to practice is of the utmost importance.

Conclusion

Throughout Section 1 of this study, the researcher outlined the pervasive issue in social work education which is student inability to connect theory to practice in the field

practicum. In Section 2, the researcher outlined the selection of a case study design to conduct the proposed research and discussed the analysis and findings of that research. Within Section 3, the researcher proposed a project designed to address the continued issue of student inability to connect theory to practice in the field practicum. The researcher included reflections related to the doctoral study, personal reflections, and directions for future research to complete Section 4.

Student inability to connect theory to practice within the field practicum has been shown to be a long-standing issue within social work education. The research conducted in this study supported that students believe this is an issue as well. The CSWE and NASW have set standards for the needed skills, competencies, practice behaviors, knowledge, and ethics needed for generalist bachelor level social work education and practitioners. In order to adequately meet those standards, I believe it is necessary to make some changes within social work education. Additional research is needed to learn if simulated learning and authentic/experiential learning is the change in social work education that will finally assist students with the connection of theory to practice. I am looking forward to conducting that additional research in hopes of finally closing the gap in student ability to connect theory to practice and improving education in a field that I have worked in and loved for so many years.

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Appendix A: Project

Curriculum Plan

Anne M. Scaggs

Curriculum Plan

Course Description

An overview of the history and development of social work as a profession. The course is designed to foster a philosophical, historical, and critical understanding of the social work profession, social work values and ethics, and fields of practice. There are no pre-requisites for this course. This course is required for acceptance in the social work program.

Course Introduction

This course provides students with an introduction to the profession of social work. Social work is a broad and dynamic profession that draws from many scientific disciplines including, but not limited to biology, psychology, and sociology. However, social work is a distinct profession from psychiatry; clinical, counseling, or school psychology; counseling; and is distinct from other academic disciplines such as psychology, sociology, economics, political science, and so forth. Social work has its own ethics, values, mission, practice skills, and body of knowledge, all of which are introduced in this course. Students will also be introduced to professional writing in the social work profession.

Additionally, this course is designed to expose students to various career paths and practice venues that the profession of social work offers. Students will participate in simulated learning experiences related to specific client populations and contexts of generalist social work practice covered such as children and families, the elderly, people with disabilities, social work practice in health care settings, social work practice in mental health settings, social work practice in criminal/juvenile justice settings, and so forth. Regardless of the topic being discussed in this course, there is a heavy focus of critical thinking skills, the evaluation of one's own values in light of the social work profession's values, and the expression of one's own ideas and thoughts in a non-prejudicial manner.

Student Learning Outcomes/Course Competencies: Social Work Knowledge, Values, & Skills

EP 2.1.1 -- Identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly.

Students will gain client advocacy skills in a supervised volunteer experience. Students will gain knowledge of professional social work (e.g., history, philosophy, values, behavioral theories etc.) and what it means to be a professional social worker in relationship to social work roles, functions, and professional boundaries. Students will gain knowledge of the professional values of the social work profession and work to

recognize their personal values in relationship to the professional values of the social work profession. Students will begin gaining the skills necessary to identify as professional social workers and conduct themselves accordingly in their behavior, appearance, and communication (written and oral). Students will gain skills in utilizing supervision and consultation in an applied experience.

EP 2.1.2 -- Apply social work ethical principles to guide professional practice.

Student will gain knowledge of the NASW Code of Ethics and their importance in social work practice. Students will recognize and manage personal values in a way that allows professional values to guide practice. Students will begin to learn the skills of applying their professional values to the social work profession's ethical standards of practice.

EP 2.1.3 -- Apply critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgments.

Students will gain knowledge of what critical thinking is and how it can be applied. Students will learn the value of critical thinking as it relates to scientific inquiry, reasoned discernment, and its importance to competent social work practice. Students will practice their critical thinking skills in written and oral class assignments.

EP 2.1.4 -- Engage diversity and difference in practice.

Students will gain knowledge of how culture, social organization, and personal values may oppress, marginalize, alienate, or unjustly create power or privilege for certain groups. Students will recognize their own personal values and biases when working with diverse groups in efforts to respect the dignity and worth of every person and promote social justice in practice. Students will gain skills in recognizing and communicating differences between people. They will begin to gain skills in recognizing clients as informants about various areas of diversity.

EP 2.1.5 -- Advance human rights and social and economic justice.

Students will gain knowledge by understanding the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination.

EP 2.1.9 -- Respond to contexts that shape practice.

Students will gain knowledge of the dynamic nature of social work practice including evolving organizational, community, and social context.

Course Materials

Required Texts:

Kirst-Ashman, K. K. (2013). Introduction to social work and social welfare: Critical thinking perspectives. (5th ed.). Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole. ISBN: 978-1-3053-8839-0

American Psychological Association. (2010). Publication manual of the American Psychological Association (6th ed.). Washington, DC: Author. ISBN: 978-1-4338-0561-5

Toolwire ® software for simulated learning can be purchased via

http://partner.pearson.com/sites/default/files/Pearson%20FoundationPartnerProfileTempl

NOTE: *All assignments submitted in this course are to be written in strict accordance with the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (6th ed.).*

Grading Information

Grading Scale:

90 – 100 = A

80 – 89 = B

70 – 79 = C

60 – 69 = D

59 or Below = F

Point Values, Description of Assignments and Examinations, and Associated Practice Behaviors:

Professional Performance   **10%**

This is relevant to participation (all students are required to engage in discussion boards by answering the discussion questions that will be posted by instructor and commenting on the posts of fellow students); including frequency and quality; professional presentation; and so forth. The expectation for students in a social work program is that they are motivated to learn and have a sense of dedication to their studies.

Simulated Learning Experiences   **15%**

Each student will be participating in simulated learning experiences related to specific client populations and contexts of generalist social work practice covered such as children and families, the elderly, people with disabilities, social work practice in health

care settings, social work practice in mental health settings, and social work practice in criminal/juvenile justice settings. Students will experience simulated classroom environments to learn the core values, skills, and theories utilized in general social work practice. Students will take notes, provide feedback, and discuss personal reflections related to their experiences.

PB1 Advocate for client access to the services of social work.

PB2 Practice personal reflection and self-correction to assure continual professional development.

PB3 Attend to professional roles and boundaries.

PB4 Demonstrate professional demeanor in behavior, appearance, and communication.

PB6 Use supervision and consultation.

PB7 Recognize and manage personal values in a way that allows professional values to guide practice.

PB10 Apply strategies of ethical reasoning to arrive at principled decisions.

PB11 Distinguish, appraise, and integrate multiple sources of knowledge, including research-based knowledge, theories, and practice wisdom.

PB14 Recognize the extent to which a culture's structures and values may oppress, marginalize, alienate, or create or enhance privilege and power.

PB15 Gain sufficient self-awareness to eliminate the influence of personal biases and values in working with diverse groups.

Social/Human Service Experience   20%

Students will engage in at least 20 hours (more is encouraged) of service in a local social/human service agency of their choice. Approval of the agency selection must be granted by the instructor and an approved list is located in the social work office. Documentation of successful completion for this experience is required; this is done by your supervisor completing a timesheet (which will be provided to you by the course instructor) documenting your service; additionally, the student will be formally rated on a rating scale as to the quality of their service by their supervisor (this will also be provided to you by the course instructor).

PB1 Advocate for client access to the services of social work.

PB2 Practice personal reflection and self-correction to assure continual professional development.

PB3 Attend to professional roles and boundaries.

PB4 Demonstrate professional demeanor in behavior, appearance, and communication.

PB6 Use supervision and consultation.

PB7 Recognize and manage personal values in a way that allows professional values to guide practice.

PB10 Apply strategies of ethical reasoning to arrive at principled decisions.

PB14 Recognize the extent to which a culture's structures and values may oppress, marginalize, alienate, or create or enhance privilege and power.

PB15 Gain sufficient self-awareness to eliminate the influence of personal biases and values in working with diverse groups.

PB16 Recognize and communicate their understanding of the importance of difference in shaping life experiences.

PB17 View themselves as learners and engage those with whom they work as informants.

PB18 Understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination.

PB27 Continuously discover, appraise, and attend to changing locales, populations, scientific and technological developments, and emerging societal trends to provide relevant services.

Resume and Personal Narrative   15%

Each student will write a resume in this course. This resume and narrative will be shared with the agency where the student will complete the required 20 hours of service. The assignment is designed to assist students in forming an identity as a professional social worker. Students are encouraged to seek assistance from the career development center on campus in completing this assignment. Additionally, each student will complete a

personal narrative, at least five pages in length (the paper can be longer if necessary) including cover sheet and references (references are expected) covering the following sections conforming to the standards of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 6th Edition (2010):

1. Your understanding of the social work profession (including its historical development, mission, and values) and how the social work profession is similar to and differentiated from sociology, psychology, psychiatry, and counseling;

2. List and define all six core values of the social work profession; discuss the relationship of these core values to the NASW Code of Ethics; choose at least two of the core values of the social work profession and discuss their importance to you and the social work profession;

3. Discuss why you desire to enter the social work profession; include a discussion of the following: your personal identification with the social work profession; the ecological paradigm (person-in environment perspective, biopsychosocial approach to clients), advocacy for client access to social work services, your conceptualization and appreciation of human diversity, and generalist social work practice;

4. Discuss three of your personal strengths and three of your personal weaknesses or challenges covering the following points;

    a. How your personal strengths will help you become a professional social worker; and

    b. How you plan to overcome any personal weaknesses or challenges to become a professional social worker; and

5. Discuss your future goals as a professional (e.g., graduate work in social work, social work employment, social work career path, career-long learning plan, and so forth).

PB2 Practice personal reflection and self-correction to assure continual professional development.

PB5 Engage in [and form a commitment to] career-long learning.

PB7 Recognize and manage personal values in a way that allows professional values to guide practice.

PB11 Distinguish, appraise, and integrate multiple sources of knowledge, including research-based knowledge, and practice wisdom.

PB14 Recognize the extent to which a culture's structures and values may oppress, marginalize, alienate, or create or enhance privilege and power.

PB15 Gain sufficient self-awareness to eliminate the influence of personal biases and values in working with diverse groups.

PB16 Recognize and communicate their understanding of the importance of difference in shaping life experiences.

PB18 Understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination.

PB27 Continuously discover, appraise, and attend to changing locales, populations, scientific and technological developments, and emerging societal trends to provide relevant services.

Examinations   **40%**

There will be four (4) online, open book (Kirst-Ashman, 2017), one attempt, timed, examinations in this course. Each of these examinations is worth 10% of your total course grade. You will take each of these examinations via Blackboard using the Monitor Respondus Lock Down browser. The exams will be multiple choice and true/false and will cover course readings, the NASW Code of Ethics, CSWE core competencies, and TSBSWE Scope of Practice.

Course Schedule

Week/Dates Lecture Topics/Readings/Assignments

Week 1

January 16-19

Course Introduction / Reading: Chapter 1-2 (Kirst-Ashman)

Lecture Topic: Introduction to Social Work and Social Welfare; Social Work Values and Ethics

Activity: Simulated learning experience – participate in a group discussion with 5 classmates. Discuss the core values of the social work profession and engage in scenarios role playing the use of each core value. Please take notes during your experience and be prepared to identify personal biases related to the core values and give feedback to your peers.

Class Discussion: Instructor and student notes will be discussed as well as student experiences with the simulated learning environment.

Week 2

January 22-26

Reading: Chapters 3-4 (Kirst-Ashman)

Lecture Topic: Empowerment and Human Diversity; The Process of Generalist Practice; An Overview of Social Work History; Policy

Activity: Simulated Learning Experience - interaction with a virtual Jane Addams, Mary Richmond, and Cesar Chavez. Review historical events and information specific to each individual and ask each individual, questions specific to their work as a professional social worker. Write a summary of your experience and discussion.

Class Discussion: Class will discuss instructor and student notes related to the simulated experience. Class will also discuss student opinions and concerns related to simulated learning.

Look for Volunteer Placement, begin work on resume and personal narrative, and have approved by Instructor

Week 3

January 29- February 2

Reading: Chapters 5-6 (Kirst-Ashman)

Lecture Topic: Policies and Programs to Combat Poverty; Social Work and services for Children and Families;

Activity: Simulated Role Play providing services to children and families. You will participate in 3 role play scenarios as the child, the parent, and the case worker. All class members will observe each role play scenario (which will involve 3 students per role play). Instructor and students will provide written feedback. Be prepared to discuss any personal biases or insights related to the difference in your personal value system and social work values. This assignment will take place over the course of two weeks.

Exam: Chapters 1-4

Week 4

February 5- 9

Reading: Chapters 7-8 (Kirst-Ashman)

Lecture Topic: SW and services for older adults; Overview of Behavioral theories used in social work practice.

Class Discussion: Open discussion about the simulated learning environment, class topics discussed previously, any questions or concerns not already addressed. Instructor and student feedback and notes will be discussed.

Exam: Chapters 1-5 (Kirst-Ashman)

Week 5

February 12-16

Reading: Chapters 9-10 (Kirst-Ashman)

Lecture Topic: SW and services for People with Disabilities

Assignment Due: Resume and Personal Narrative Due by 2/14/18

Activity: Simulated Learning Experience - students will enter the simulated learning classroom and review the Systems Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Psychosocial Theory. You will then progress through a series of questions about each theory until you show proficiency in distinguishing the differences between each theory. If needed, you will be re-routed back through the questions for remediation until you show proficiency. You have two weeks to work through these three theories.

Exam: Chapters 6-9 on 2/16/18

Week 6

February 19-23

Reading: Chapters 11-12 (Kirst-Ashman)

Lecture Topic: SW and services for people in Health Care Abuse and Dependence

Activity: Simulated Role Play providing services for older adults. Each student will participate in two role-play scenarios as a client and a caseworker. You can select from three practice settings: nursing home, hospital, or hospice. You will write a summary of your personal reflections from your perspective as the client and the worker.

Class Discussion: Instructor and student notes and feedback related to the role play will be discussed.

Week 7

February 26 – March 2

Reading: Chapters 13-14 (Kirst-Ashman)

Lecture Topic: Social Work and services in mental health; Social Work and Substance use

Activity: Simulated Learning Experience – students will enter the simulated learning classroom and review policies regarding treatment of those with mental health issues. You will then participate in a role play scenario as one member of a multidisciplinary team making recommendations related to the treatment of clients with mental health issues. This role play requires a total of five students and is done as a group. All class members will observe roles plays and provide feedback as will the instructor.

Class Discussion: Instructor and student notes related to the learning experience and role play will be covered in the class discussion. Student will be encouraged to discuss their overall experience with the simulated learning environment.

Exam: Chapters 10-13 on 3/2/18

Week 8

March 5 – 9

Reading: Chapters 15-16 (Kirst-Ashman)

Lecture Topic: SW and services for Youths and in the schools; SW and services in the criminal justice system

Class Discussion: Topics for discussion include types of services provided to youth in the school systems, feedback related to experiences with the simulated learning environment, a review of the Systems Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Psychosocial Theory.

Week 9

March 12 – 16

Activity: Simulated Role Play providing services to those involved in the criminal justice system. Students will participate in two role-play scenarios as a client and caseworker. You can select from two practice settings, a prisoner just paroled or a teenager on probation. Personal reflections will be discussed in class as a group.

Questionnaire Administered: Students will complete a questionnaire covering course content, instructor skills, simulated learning environment, and overall class experience.

Assignment Due: Volunteer hours sheet and Agency evaluation due 3/14/18

Exam: Chapters 14-16 on 3/16/18

Appendix B: Permission

Date

Local University
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs

RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study at your institution. I am currently enrolled in the Richard W. Riley College of Education at Walden University in Minneapolis, MN and am in the process of writing my Doctoral Study. The study is entitled **Student Perspectives on the Application of Theory to Practice in the Field Practicum.**

I hope that the university administration will allow me to recruit up to 10 individuals currently enrolled in the social work seminar and field practicum courses at your institution to complete a 30-minute interview. I would also like to observe students in the seminar course. I expect my research to take no longer than a period of time spanning four to six weeks. I have enclosed the Dual IRB application, supporting documents, and the Letter of Approval from the IRB Committee at Walden University for your review. Interested students, who volunteer to participate, will be given a consent form to be signed and returned to the primary researcher at the beginning of the interview process. Students observed in the classroom, but not interviewed, will also sign a consent form prior to the observation. A copy of the consent form is included detailing the role of the researcher, purpose of the study, the length of the study, and identified risks of participation.

If approval is granted, student participants will complete the interview process in a location of their choosing such as a classroom or other quiet setting at the university site. The interview process should take no longer than 30 minutes. The interview results will be coded for themes related to the research question and individual responses of this study will remain absolutely confidential and anonymous. Should this study be published, no participant information will be included? No costs will be incurred by either your institution or the individual participants.

Your approval to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated. I thank you for your consideration and look forward to your response. If the IRB Committee has any questions or concerns, I can be reached via email at anne.scaggs@waldenu.edu or by phone at 940-453-8328.

If institutional approval is granted, kindly sign below and return the signed form in the enclosed self-addressed envelope. Alternatively, kindly submit a signed letter of permission on your institution's letterhead acknowledging your consent and permission for me to conduct this study at your institution.

Sincerely,

Anne M. Scaggs, LCSW

Walden University Doctoral Student

Enclosures

cc: Dr. Dillard, Doctoral Committee Chair, Walden University

Approved by:

_____ _____ _____

Appendix C:

Student Perspectives on the Application of Theory to Practice in the Field Practicum

You are being asked to take part in a research study of how social work students in the field practicum perceive, experience, and feel about the connection of theory to practice within the field practicum. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

The researcher conducting this study is Anne Scaggs, a doctoral student at Walden University.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to learn the beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives of social work students in the field practicum as they relate to the application of theory to practice within the field practicum experience.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

> Participate in an interview. The interview will take approximately 30 minutes and with your permission, the interview will be audiotaped. However, audiotaping the interview is not required for participation.

> Provide consent for the researcher to observe your interaction in the seminar class. The observation will occur one time for approximately 45 minutes. If necessary, an additional 45-minute observation will occur.

Here are some sample questions:

1. What are some of the theories you have learned in class?

2. Are you able to recall all the theories you have learned in class?

3. Have you encountered any difficulty connecting those theories into practice?

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. I will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one at TWU will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to take part in the study, you are free to withdraw at any time.

Risks and Benefits:

Participating in this type of study involves some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as stress, fatigue, or becoming upset. Participating in this type of study would not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing.

Compensation:

There is no compensation for your participation in this study.

Privacy:

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purpose outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Research records and all data collected will be kept secure in a locked file; only the researcher will have access to the records. If we audiotape the interview, I will destroy the tape after it has been transcribed and reviewed for accuracy by the participants, which I anticipate will be within two months of its taping. All data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

Contacts and Questions:

You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Anne Scaggs at anne.scaggs@waldenu.edu. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is #03-28-16-0359175 and expires on 3/27/2017. The researcher will give you a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

If you feel you understand the study well enough to make a decision about it, please indicate your consent by signing below.

Printed Name of Participant   _____

Date of Consent   _____

Participant's Signature   _____

In addition to agreeing to participate, I also consent to having the interview audiotaped.

Participant's Signature   _____

Researcher's Signature   _____

This consent form will be kept by the researcher for at least five years beyond the end of the study.

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Pre-Interview

Please provide a four-digit number to replace your name for confidentiality in the transcription.

Project: Student perspectives on connecting theory to practice in the field practicum

Time of Interview:
Date:
Place:
Interviewer:
Interviewee Number:

(Have interviewee read and sign consent form if not previously signed.)
(Begin audio recorder)

Opening Statement:

Before we begin, I would like to thank you for participating in my research study. The interview will be audiotaped and then transcribed. You will receive a copy of the transcript to review as soon as possible. I invite you to make any changes, clarifications, or additional comments to the interview. Do you have any questions about what I just said? Please do not hesitate to let me know if you need to take a break or want to stop. Do you have any other questions? May I begin?

Rapport Questions
    Tell me a little about yourself.
    When did you first begin to look at social work as a major?
    How did you select this university as a place to study social work?
    Have you enjoyed your time at this university?
    Have you enjoyed your social work classes?
    What was your favorite social work course?
        Did you have a least favorite?
        If yes, why was it your least favorite?

Questions

4. What are some of the theories you have learned in class?

5. Are you able to recall all the theories you have learned in class?

6. Have you encountered any difficulty connecting those theories into practice?

    a. Tell me more about why or why not?

    b. What concerns, if any, do you have about connecting theory to practice within the field practicum?

7. Have you ever heard about anyone having difficulty connecting theory to practice within the field practicum?

8. Do you believe students have difficulty connecting theory to practice in their field practicums?

    a. Tell me more about why or why not?

9. Have you had any difficulty connecting theory to practice?

    a. If yes, does that cause you any concern? Why or why not?

    b. If no, does it concern you that other students may have difficulty connecting theory to practice? Why or why not?

Appendix E: Observational Protocol

Date: _____ Time: _____ Length of activity:_____minutes Site: _____ Participants: _____ 	
Research Question: How do social work students at a local university describe the issues related to the connection of theory to practice within the field practicum?	
Descriptive Notes *(Description of participants, researcher will observe learning activities specific to integration of theory and practice and look for questions/concerns/comments related to integration of theory and practice.)*	*Reflective Notes* *(questions to self, observations of nonverbal behavior, and my interpretations)*
Physical setting: visual layout 	

Appendix F: Peer Debriefer Confidentiality Agreement

Dear Participant,

As the researcher, I ensure that the information you disclose through interviews, observations, my field notes, and my reflective journaling will remain confidential to the professor of a community college who will serve as the peer debriefer of this study. Her signature indicates she will uphold all ethical standards which include the privacy of the information you presented.

Confidentiality:

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your information for any purposes outside this interview project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in any reports of the interview.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher's name is Anne M. Scaggs. The researcher's Committee Chair is Dr. Teresa Dillard. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Anne Scaggs at anne.scaggs@waldenu.edu or the instructor at Teresa.dillard@waldenu.edu. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 612-312-1210. The researcher will give you a copy of this form to keep.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have received answers to questions I have at this time. I am 18 years of age or older, and I consent to participate in the interview.

Printed Name of Participant: professor of a community college

Participant's Written or Electronic Signature: _____

Researcher's Written or Electronic Signature: _____

<div align="center">Anne.scaggs@waldenu.edu</div>

Electronic signatures are regulated by the Uniform Electronic Transactions Act. Legally, an "electronic signature" can be the person's typed name, their email address, or any other identifying marker. An electronic signature is just as valid as written signature as long as both parties have agreed to conduct the transaction electronically.

Appendix G: Transcriptionist Confidentiality Agreement

Name of Signer: Transcriptionist

During the course of my activity in transcribing the collected data for this research: **"Student Perspectives on the Application of Theory to Practice in the Field Practicum"** I will have access to information, which is confidential and should not be disclosed. I acknowledge that the information must remain confidential, and that improper disclosure of confidential information can be damaging to the participant.

By signing this Confidentiality Agreement, I acknowledge and agree that:

1. I will not disclose or discuss any confidential information with others, including friends or family.
2. I will not in any way divulge, copy, release, sell, loan, alter or destroy any confidential information except as properly authorized.
3. I will not discuss confidential information where others can overhear the conversation. I understand that it is not acceptable to discuss confidential information even if the participant's name is not used.
4. I will not make any unauthorized transmissions, inquiries, modification or purging of confidential information.
5. I agree that my obligations under this agreement will continue after termination of the job that I will perform.
6. I understand that violation of this agreement will have legal implications.
7. I will only access or use systems or devices I'm officially authorized to access and I will not demonstrate the operation or function of systems or devices to unauthorized individuals.
Signing this document, I acknowledge that I have read the agreement and I agree to comply with all the terms and conditions stated above.

Transcriptionist 6/20/2016

Signature: Date: