



Article

When Teacher Becomes Student: Unveiling Contradictions within Australian Social Work Education

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Abstract: Social work education in Australia is bound by a range of rules and assumptions supported by both higher education institutions and the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). This autoethnography explores a range of contradictions within social work education from the unique perspective of someone who was simultaneously a student and academic in social work. This experience occurred because, although PhD qualified in social work, rulings set down by the AASW lead to me being excluded from consideration in permanent roles. The position led me to becoming an online Master of Social Work (MSW) student whilst still being a social work educator allowing me to explore a range of contradictory rules and processes within social work education. Analysis of my reflections, journals, assignments and conversations with colleagues unveiled a range of mixed messages in relation to social inclusion, technical rationalism, self-care and field placement supervision. My findings contribute to current debates about how neoliberalism currently impacts on inclusion in social work education and development of a professional identity. In exploring my dual roles, this autoethnography unveils contradictions within social work education and accreditation that question the social justice mission of the profession.

Keywords: autoethnography; social work education; field placement

1. Introduction

This article examines my unique and individual experience of being a simultaneous social work student and academic. This occurred due to my desire to contribute to social justice but also due to rules set down by the accrediting body, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). These rules are known as the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS) and specify a range of requirements including the qualifications of teaching staff, student placement requirements and curriculum. However, my experience of the ASWEAS was that they contradict the social justice mission of social work, often focusing on student exclusion rather than inclusion. My experience and research confirmed that many of the rules are based on history or perceived wisdom rather than evidence, contradicting the professional standing social work hopes to maintain. My own tension of being simultaneously a social work lecturer and student allowed me lived experience of these contradictions and their real-life implications.

My own experience of the contradictions within the ASWEAS began when I faced challenges in becoming a tenured social work lecturer. Despite having a PhD in social work and extensive teaching experience in the profession, I was rejected or unable to apply for permanent roles because I could not join the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). My past as an economically and geographically disadvantaged young person meant I had qualified in a similar but shorter degree in human services rather than social work. Later in life this economic reality meant I was unable

to gain a full-time social work academic role. My experience was that the length of social work degrees, particularly the length of placements has profound impacts on students from disadvantaged backgrounds who fit outside of the traditional, historical lens of being “nice girls from nice homes” (Lawrence 2016). Whilst the ASWEAS are used to maintain notions of consistency and rigor, they can also exclude and ostracise non-traditional social work students (Hosken 2018). This contradicts the stated aim of social work to achieve social justice and address inequality.

Although I experienced many personal contradictions in becoming a social work academic, I also observed wider contradictions caused in my view by strict adherence to the ASWEAS within the institutions I was involved with. This could be summarised in three areas:

- (1) an emphasis on technical rationality, despite social works need for a person in environment approach;
- (2) training of placement supervisors in what is meant to be a signature pedagogy in social work and; and
- (3) framing organisational needs over personal needs whilst encouraging students to develop self-care capacities.

These findings examine my own unique lived experience and are not meant as a blanket commentary of all areas or locations of social work education. As such, they are offered through autoethnography as I navigated the difficult personal and professional road to becoming a tenured social work academic. In examining my journals, placement reflections, assignments and conversations, I was able to reflect upon my own experience of how the ASWEAS form a social work identity concerned with conforming to rules rather than engaging students in critical social change.

2. Why an Autoethnography?

Within this article, I have used autoethnography to highlight a unique experience that was at times messy, confusing and frustrating. I wanted to capture detailed accounts and examples of how educational standards and expectations had impacted on my life and potentially the lives of many other students. The conversational style of autoethnography allowed for my experience to be accessible and increased the potential for change to occur (Ellis and Bochner 2006). Autoethnography was also chosen because I wanted to present my difficult personal journey in becoming social worker whilst also being a non-tenured social work academic.

As a researcher, I have examined disadvantaged students experience of studying social work, especially in relation to pedagogy and curriculum (Newcomb et al. 2017). Most research involving human services or social work students is conducted by academics and researchers and rarely is this research done or written by students themselves (Holley et al. 2007). In writing about my own experience, I am not trying to speak a universal or even generalisable certainty and I do not proclaim my lived experience as the truth for all social work students or academics (Witkin 2014). Rather I am attempting to uncover unique perspectives and dichotomies in my own lived experiences alongside my perceptions and emotions in becoming a social worker. I have used a range of data sources in this article, including a personal journal, reflections written during my placements, reflective writing produced in my course work and recollection of conversations with family, colleagues and peers. I have taken care to de-identify institutions and individuals throughout the process of writing this autoethnography. I felt it was ethical to not provide specific detail of other student's or academic's lives and have instead focused on my own unique experience. Specific universities and my interaction with them have not been named because I did not feel it was important to this narrative. Instead, I have focused on the underlying rules which define this story; the ASWEAS. This unique perspective is not accessible in conventional studies and conventional data sources, making this topic ripe for exploration using autoethnography (Ellis 2000; Witkin 2014).

This experience did not however exist in a vacuum, it is contextual and intrinsically linked to the culture and the profession of social work. The practices of the AASW who oversee the profession

have a profound impact on the experience of many students and professionals, including myself. I am also aware of the potential professional implications and vulnerability that exist in exploring and critiquing the profession in which I teach (Ellis 2000; Tolich 2010; Witkin 2014). My findings may not be considered flattering or advantageous to me in my career as a social work academic (Witkin 2014). However, I believe in uncovering this subjugated knowledge I can evoke emotion and deep thought about the social work profession (Witkin 2014). I must however acknowledge that for some within the profession my experiences and interpretations may be perceived as threatening, unjustified or even unfair (Tolich 2010). These impressions can be permanent and may stick, however in transgressing these conventional boundaries between my professional and student self this autoethnography can highlight ways social work can continue to grow and develop more inclusive practices for students (Witkin 2014). This article adds to existing contributions which have found the ASWEAS as oppressive and disempowering and give thought to how these can change and meet the social justice goals of social work (Hosken 2018). Before I explain my findings, I need to explain my own story and experience of contradiction within social work education.

3. Being a Human Services Student and Practitioner

In 1994, I remember vividly telling my intelligent, formidable grandmother that I had been accepted to study a Bachelor of Human Services. "Why would you want to study that?" she asked in a broad, Queensland, country accent when I explained the degree and my future employment options. I smiled expecting this pragmatic response from the former headmistress who had raised a severely disabled child whilst running a farm. No doubt she would have preferred me to take a job in the public service or become a teacher such as herself. My working-class mother and grandmother both urged me to undertake a degree to ensure I had a job in which I "was not on my feet." I had originally hoped to study social work however my high school results although impressive did not meet the then high entry requirement. I was impressed with being offered a place at university as I only knew a handful of people with university qualifications; namely my school teachers and my older sister. I had never set foot on a university campus, but I knew an education would provide me with social and economic mobility. Thus, as a seventeen-year-old, I moved alone 160 kilometres away to start a new and independent life.

I was happy within my human services degree as it opened my mind and heart to a new way of thinking, doing and being. I made many friends who remain with me, many came from difficult backgrounds where abuse and alienation were common. Most of the student cohort were mature age and moulded my young, impressionable brain. Compared to my quiet, country childhood my peers often revealed, complex personal experiences of adversity and resilience. During my studies, I saw some become dependent on heroin, others came out as gay and some disclosed shameful, life limiting illnesses. Simultaneously, I enjoyed learning and engaging with a range of social issues and theories from radical and practice orientated academics, whilst juggling my studies with part time work. As my sense of social justice was developed, I became involved in student politics, feminism and queer activism. In retrospect it was a lively time and I felt deeply that I was working towards a bright future that would contribute to positively changing the world.

Within my first year of study, I became aware that a social work qualification was considered superior to a human services qualification as it would allow me to work in health and clinical settings. Changing into social work after a year was possible but as a person from a low socio-economic background, dependent on government benefits this would lead to another three years of grinding poverty. I also knew my heart lay with community work which became obvious to me during my two student placements. In 1997, I graduated and went on to work in a range of human service roles in both Australia and the United Kingdom. Within these jobs, I worked with a vast range of people with many different qualifications from all over the world. During this time, I found little need to differentiate between social work and human services despite their differing approaches to social care.

4. Social Work and Human Services—What Is the Difference?

Both social work and human services knowledge is derived from a range of disciplines including psychology, sociology, law, biological science, politics and economics. Although social workers are trained to work in a range of contexts, their education includes exploration and the ability to display competence in the helping process (Harms 2015). This many include teaching students how engage, assess, intervene and plan processes of change with clients (Hepworth 2011). Many social work courses also require students to study and gain skills in the area of case work and case management (Hepworth 2011). Human services in Australia however has a slightly different focus in how to work with disadvantaged people.

In Australia, human services as a discipline and course of study emerged in the 1990s with a focus on work within the community services (Lowell 2005). Human Services is concerned with social equality through a generic problem solving methodology across many fields of social care (Wiles 1994). Human services rejects both medical and public health models of helping focusing on assisting people to find the solutions to their own concerns (Wiles 1994). The focus of human services strongly resonates with my own values and the “can-do” attitude imbibed in me through a country childhood. Rather than relying on an expert to assess or intervene in a problem, self-reliance and problem solving where appreciated qualities during my country childhood. However, social work and human services courses vary in relation to curriculum, field placement and the length of courses.

In Australia, a social work qualification requires students to undertake a four-year undergraduate degree with 1000 placement hours, generally completed in two placements of 500 hours (Australian Association of Social Workers 2012). Students who already possess an undergraduate degree in any discipline can complete a Master of Social Work (Qualifying) over the space of two years. Social work students must complete units whose curriculum complies with ASWEAS. However, Human Services undergraduate degrees take only three years to complete and include two student placements totalling just 550 h (Australian Community Workers Association 2014). Within many universities, social work and human services students complete the same curriculum simultaneously, within the first two years of study (Camilleri 2005). Human services courses must meet accreditation standards with the Australian Community Workers Association, which are less rigid in terms of content and the qualifications of teaching staff (Australian Community Workers Association 2017). Codes of the ethics and practice standards between the accrediting bodies for both degrees show little differentiation. From an industry perspective, the roles available to graduates of social work can vary compared to human services in Australia. However, both human services and social work qualifications can lead to a range of roles in child protection, not for profit or community work in Australia.

5. Becoming an Academic

In 2010, I started working in academia and decided I wanted to become a full time academic. To achieve this goal, I knew I would need to complete an honours year in human services and then a PhD. In 2011 I undertook an honours year in human services and received first class honours which enabled me to begin a PhD in 2014. In Australia, the qualification for entry into a PhD program is completion of first class honours or masters research and the discipline in which the PhD is conducted is defined by the topic. Due to my undergraduate qualification in human services and my research topic which involved both human services and social work students, I was able to complete my PhD in the discipline area of social work. Upon completing my PhD, it became difficult to find full time permanent work as an academic in social work due to my inability to join the AASW. Although I had a PhD in social work, I was ineligible to join. It seemed the choices I made as an eighteen-year-old meant I missed a vital step on my road to joining the social work academy.

According to the AASW (Australian Association of Social Workers 2012), fifty per cent of all permanent staff in Australian social work programs must hold either a Bachelor or Master qualification in social work. Social work and human services are generally taught simultaneously in Australia with a growing number of students undertaking social work leading to a demand for social work

academics. During my job hunt, no positions for human services scholars were advertised in my area of Australia. This meant my job opportunities in academia were narrowed and I was rejected from three possible positions due to my inability to join the AASW. I felt these rejections personally because I had worked so hard to become an ideal, early career social work academic; I had a PhD in social work, an outstanding publication record, a teaching award and advanced teaching experience with excellent student reviews. When I shared this frustration with my working class, rural family, they were astounded and shocked. It seemed my goal of becoming an academic was overshadowed by one rule, defined by a far off, anonymous organisation.

Emotionally, I was also torn as to why I was good enough to teach and research in social work across two universities on contract or casually but not in a permanent role. At times I found myself working with permanent staff who did not hold a PhD and had limited research and practical experience but were considered more employable because they were members of the AASW. As a young person, I had not entered or changed into the degree largely due to my socio-economic background. Once more I felt as if social work was excluding me due to my working class, rural roots and I felt deep rejection.

6. Becoming a Social Work Student

In 2017, I felt the only way to fulfil my dream was to enter an online Master of Social Work (MSW) program. It was a difficult decision, financially and personally, placing strain on my young family in what felt like a “paper gathering” mission. I remained working as a lecturer, tutor and researcher within both undergraduate and postgraduate social work at one university whilst studying my MSW at another. As an experienced educator in the area I struggled to understand what I would gain from yet another degree in the same area as my PhD.

My dual identity was difficult to manage, and I found myself concealing it from peers, students and other educators. In my role as an educator I was careful not to disclose to students I was also myself a student of social work, for fear of being viewed as incompetent or underqualified. When I did disclose my dual status, students were shocked that a doctorate was not considered a qualifying course for AASW membership. Some social workers suggested it was about time I gained the MSW and that I would gain a great deal from my studies. Those defining themselves as critical social workers were disappointed by this professional gate keeping but advised me it was a sensible move.

Conversely, whilst studying the masters I was careful not to advise my student peers or educators that I had a PhD in social work, fearing I would be viewed as belligerent or over qualified. Upon finding out, some students chose to work with me, knowing my content and practice knowledge was advanced. I was often frustrated with my fellow students limited knowledge or engagement with course materials. I did disclose my situation to some lecturers who pitied my experience or called upon me when no one else could answer difficult questions. Mostly as a student I felt angry and frustrated at the time and money being spent on gaining my “piece of paper.” I became a social work student because of a specific rule but being a social work student lead me to find many more rules which can define what it is to be a social worker.

Further thought and examination lead me to think about social work as a profession concerned with a contradictory stance in simultaneously critiquing systems whilst also building and maintaining them. Social work has a long history of being seen as a mechanism for social control (Mullaly 2010). Hosken (2018) suggests rules such as the ASWEAS are designed to building the profession of social work, rather than a larger social justice mission. Although social work is positioned to help those experiencing disadvantage and inequality it can also maintain oppressive social systems using rules. This is evidenced in social works long history of enforcing government requirements for benefits or judgement and assessment of those worthy of assistance (Solas 2018). The tension between social control and social justice was evident within my experience of the MSW training. I noticed this in relation to technical rationalist approaches to teaching, poor training of placement supervisors and contradictory messages about the importance of student self-care. Aligning with the process of

autoethnography I now explore these contradictions through data collected via reflections, assignments and conversations.

7. Contradiction One: An Emphasis on Technical Rationality, Despite Social Works Need for a Person in Environment Approach

In teaching human services and social work, an approach which favours rational, procedural skills-based knowledge acquisition is known as a technical rationality (Dewey 1933; Fook and Askeland 2007; Gursansky et al. 2010; Schon 1983). Within contemporary social work education and scholarship, debate exists as to how much emphasis should be given to the development of skills over more critical approaches (Bhuyan et al. 2017; Morley 2016). As social work also considers how an individual's environment and its unique factors impact on their situation, procedural approaches may not allow students to build skills to critically engage or problem solve with clients (Harms 2015). As an academic I was aware of these debates and had experienced and considered such issues within my own teaching practice. Within my own PhD research, I had examined technical rationality and how it impacts on student's ability to develop skills in critical thinking and reflection. The focus on technical rationality was often apparent as I taught social work students who seemed very concerned with meeting assessment requirements rather than engaging in deep reflection and analysis of content. As both a social work academic and student I was often torn between ensuring I meet the technical rational elements of course work and assessment whilst tiring to engage them deeply with content. As a social work student at times my deep engagement seemed to go "too deep" and alarmed fellow students. On one occasion when I suggested that I did not feel proud to take on the title of social worker in class, a peer was shocked and confronted. As an experienced social work educator, ideas such as social control and neoliberalism were my bread and butter. However, for my student peers these ideas appeared new and dangerous, leaving me uncomfortable in my role; was I a student or a teacher? Should I be a passive recipient of knowledge or question the ideas presented to me?

I reflected on the curriculum within both the universities where I was a student and teacher which seemed to focus on showing both myself and my students met the knowledge and skills required for the ASWEAS standards rather than developing competency in critical thinking or problem solving. For example, during my time occupying the dual roles I found emphasis was placed on students, including my ability to display effective communication and counselling skills however students still struggled to see advocacy or collective consciousness raising as social work skills. Whilst this approach to skills acquisition may be different in other Australian universities, the two I had direct contact with emphasised technical rationality as the preferred method of teaching and learning for social work graduates.

My unique personal experience meant I found the MSW to be an unchallenging and frustrating educational experience, primarily due to having a PhD in social work, coupled with extensive teaching and field experience. I was familiar with most of the course content and contemporary writers in the discipline. Moreover, as an educator, I was able to quickly ascertain how to answer assessment and meet the requisite criteria that were aligned with the ASWEAS standards rather than skills or knowledge I might need as a social worker. I easily passed all the assessments within the course, often excelling. One assignment was completed in eight hours including research and writing and afforded me a high distinction. These experiences made me feel my assessment was procedural and transactional in nature, requiring me to display formulaic or expected knowledge.

The range of students within my MSW course was similar to those I had taught as an educator. Students consisted of primarily three groups; international students new to Australia and human services and social work; domestic students new to human services and experienced human services practitioners who needed a social work qualification for career advancement. Whilst all these groups were on learning journeys, it seemed the experienced practitioners such as myself were provided with limited challenges and rigour. I empathised with educators in my course who seemed to struggle with the same issues as myself in trying to meet the vast and differing learning needs. Being a student

in the classroom involved immense self-restraint at times, as I often witnessed my educators who were unable to engage students in deeper reflection and debate due to the diverse student cohort. Often, I restrained my responses not just based purely on knowledge but also in relation to deeper political, social and professional debate. My second life as an educator meant I did not wish to confuse or confound my peers; I also did not wish to derail or distract my lecturers and tutors into these deeper and what I considered more profound debates. However, this self-restraint meant there was limited connections made with my peers and opportunities for engaging in creative problem-based responses or real social change were lost. Once again, I experienced what often occurred to me as an educator; in meeting the needs of such a vast cohort, learning was often reduced to observable skills or basic theoretical knowledge.

The requirement to show I could meet standards or criteria extended into my experience of field placement. Within my reflections on my field placement I asked if the paper work requirements: “really show learning or simply becomes a way of replicating the idea of what social work is; a series of skills or tasks which align with professional ideas.” These processes made me consider if I was being taught to engage in the mission of social justice or to simply replicate bureaucracy. Rather than equipping students for social change, my experience of studying a MSW seemed to reflect a wider issue I had also experienced as an educator with excessive focus on graduates being able to assess, intervene and plan how to manage people with “problems” (Hanesworth 2017). This contradicted not only my own practice framework but my earlier training in human services which had focused on empowering people to find solutions to their own problems (Wiles 1994). Limited mechanisms for exploring how social structures or oppression could be challenged and changed existed within the MSW course. Hanesworth (2017) suggests this is due to a neoliberal trend in social work courses to provide task-orientated, vocational expertise to students.

Within my social work education during residentials and online my peers developed what I saw as a narrow or limited view of social work, one in which you simply follow the rules. This limited view of social work made me reflect in my journal that it was easy to see social work as: “reduced to a series of tasks; counselling, assessing, filling in paperwork or following procedures.” Certain units and approaches encouraged students to think differently about social work, however in conversation with my peers many failed to see areas such as activism, community development or advocacy as “real social work.” Coming from a human services background, alongside my role as a social work educator this approach saddened me greatly as much of my previous work had involved working directly with students, practitioners and groups for social change. Further experiences in the course made me question assumptions about pedagogy and student wellbeing.

8. Contradiction Two: Poor Supervision Training in What Is Meant to be a Signature Pedagogy in Social Work

As an educator I had always found field education a challenging area of social work education. As with many professions, field education attempts to provide students with real life, contextual learning allowing them to link theory with the practice of social work. Rather than simply explaining or simulating social work knowledge and skills, students apply and are assessed upon this during their field placement. It is a unique and important component of social work degrees and as such has been called the signature pedagogy of social work (Holden et al. 2011; Wayne et al. 2010). The multiple and strict adherence to the ASWEAS had always seemed to cause conflict and complications with students and service providers. I had also witnessed various forms of unethical and poor practice in the area of field education. This had led me to rejecting requests to undertake further work in this area due to the limited time and money allocated to this area of social work education. However, in becoming a social worker engagement in field placement was a non-negotiable requirement.

My previous experiences of field placement seemed to contradict long established ideas that it was the signature pedagogy in social work education. Field placement has been traditionally considered a form of apprenticeship, where students engage in direct practice supported by expert practitioners

(Cleak and Smith 2012; Wayne et al. 2010). Whilst students are also required to be supervised by a social worker in both placements the idea of an apprenticeship model has changed in contemporary field placement. Increasingly, students are being supervised on a day-to-day basis by workplace supervisors who may not be social workers (Cleak and Smith 2012). If the workplace does not have a social worker available, the university must provide one for regular social work supervision. However, social work supervisors receive no additional training or accreditation to undertake supervision. Instead they need two years full time work experience and “some basic face to face or online postgraduation preparation” (Australian Association of Social Workers 2012).

The ASWEAS set very strict requirements about student hours which includes undertaking 1000 hours of placement, a rule based on tradition rather than pedagogical evidence (Wayne et al. 2010). Internationally social work placements vary in length and location, despite the profession being recognised between countries (Johnstone et al. 2016). Those students seeking to gain Recognition for Prior Learning (RPL) for their first placement due to industry experience must prove they were supervised by a social worker. This is problematic for many students hoping to RPL their practice experience who may not have had or be able to prove their supervisor was a social worker. I reflected upon this in my journal during my MSW:

“During this intensive I’ve met many students who are unable to get RPL for their work experience. This has included a range of students who are supervised by registered psychologists. One student had worked extensively in statutory and community development positions for over ten years work but could not RPL this because she was not supervised by a social worker. Instead she had been supervised by psychologists who had received specialist training in supervision as a requirement within their discipline (Supervisor Training). This seemed perverse to me as in social work, no formal training is required to be a supervisor beyond an undergraduate degree. The Australian government had trusted this student to assess criminal’s safety in the community, but she couldn’t be trusted to have RPL approved on a placement. Another example I heard this week was of a student who could not receive RPL because their previous supervisor who was a social worker had died unexpectedly and therefore could not verify their supervision. This requirement for RPL seems unfair to me and completely opposite to the goals and objectives of social work to create a socially just society. Surely other options could be presented such as client testimonials, staff and supervisor references or a written application.”

Within this reflection I do call upon existing social work students to be supervised by psychologists rather I wish to highlight a paradoxical situation. In order to become a social worker, you needed to be supervised by a social worker, despite the fact supervisors had no formalised training in the process. My own experience as a liaison visitor for social work students had shown that this supervision was often haphazard and lacked depth. As a social work educator, I had spent a great deal of time in the classroom deconstructing and reconstructing poor student experiences of field placement supervision. Now as both a student and educator I questioned if claim could really be made to field placement being a signature pedagogy in social work if field supervisor training is not mandatory. Wayne et al. (2010) suggest that if field placement is a signature pedagogy it should not be left to volunteer supervisors with no formal training in supervision. Whilst students are required to meet a strict range of placement requirements, field placement supervision seems to be lacking. This highlights the tension within the current neoliberal environment of universities where emphasis is placed on academic research rather than teaching leading to poor outcomes in social work placements (Wayne et al. 2010). The insistence on maintaining and upholding the ASWEAS also negatively impacts on student well-being during their five hundred-hour placements.

9. Contradiction Three: Framing Organisational Needs over Personal Needs Whilst Encouraging Students to Develop Self-Care Capacities

Due to the emotional strain and often poor workplace conditions, the development of self-care behaviours in social work students is recommended (Griffiths et al. 2019). Within social work education self-care strategies such as yoga or mindfulness are rarely explicitly taught to students (Gockel and Deng 2016; Griffiths et al. 2019; Mensinga 2011). However, students are encouraged to develop self-care strategies throughout their degree without guidance. In my own PhD research, I was told by students that self-care was not explicitly taught, disadvantaging students from adverse backgrounds (Newcomb et al. 2017).

The requirements of social work placement in Australia can be difficult for students to meet and includes a requirement to work a minimum of two days per week (with a minimum of two weeks full time) and a maximum of five. Requests for flexibility regarding required hours are decided upon by each university, however the ASWEAS state that changes should only be allowed in extenuating circumstances. Extenuating circumstances do not include family commitments, paid work, holidays, moving house, changing jobs, poverty and transitory health matters (Australian Association of Social Workers 2012). Universities are also required to report on the number of students provided with flexibility in their placement hours (Australian Association of Social Workers 2012). For students experiencing financial hardship additional economic support is only available to a limited number of students through individual university scholarships.

In the shadow of these rigid rules, students are encouraged to engage in a continual process of self-care during their placement. Self-care is not explicitly mentioned within the AASW practice standards, code of ethics or education accreditation standards. However, students are required to be fit for practice, placing the emphasis on student impairment rather than an imperative for organisations or universities to teach and ensure self-care is occurring.

From my previous experience as a liaison visitor and workplace supervisor of social work students, I had witnessed first-hand the stress students experience on placement due to these inflexible requirements. I had counselled students who could not afford to buy petrol or groceries and dealt with emotionally and physically exhausted students whose performance on placement was compromised by balancing paid work, placement, course work and family commitments. Now suddenly I found myself in the same situation; broke and exhausted, trying to balance a range of duties, responsibilities and tasks. My experience is mirrored by a range of research relating to social work students experience of financial stress, mental illness and poor health outcomes whilst on placement (Baglow and Gair 2019; Johnstone et al. 2016). My own experience of student placement was not unique, and I struggled to balance my paid work with placement requirements and caring responsibilities. The costs of child care, parking and transportation ate into my savings and I longed for the five hundred hours to be over. This situation made me reflect in my journal:

“Rather than teaching students about social work practice, social work placements are teaching them that social work is about personal struggle and denial of their own well-being. It makes me sad to call myself a social worker, when this is the stress, we place students under.”

Although many students are told self-care is important, placing them in social work placements which cause poverty contradicts and devalues the importance of self-care to social work practice. I lamented during my masters that: “the AASW could assist the self-care of students through setting realistic workloads (clearer tasks about what students should or should not do), reasonable working hours (500 h is too long!) and providing more accessible professional supervision.”

A range of options for increased student wellbeing during placement are available. Whilst some have suggested the importance of students receiving more financial support from the state, this is inconsistent with current neo-liberal welfare policies (Johnstone et al. 2016). The placement rules for social work students further disadvantages students from adverse backgrounds because of their rigidity (Hosken 2018). Those who are not able to be financially supported by family struggle to meet

requirements of placement with little or no time for self-care (Baglow and Gair 2019). Currently, limited knowledge exists as to the impact of prescribed placement hours on student's educational outcomes and placement hours vary throughout the world (Johnstone et al. 2016). As an educator, I had seen how field placement requirements had led students to experience poverty, miscarriages, depression, anxiety and homelessness. It had made me feel frustrated and angry, but as a social work student it instilled different feelings in me; fatigue, resentment and a sensation of being a small, shrinking person whose well being is not important to the wider social work machine. An epiphany occurred to me during the process of doing field placement: students are too exhausted to change this and are relying on educators, universities and the AASW to work in their best interests. My identity and experience of being a social work student lead me to realise that as a social work academic I have a moral and ethical obligation to address this problem. Alternatives to the current field placement model need to be trialled and considered; if they do not work, they can be refined or changed again. Changes could include reducing placement hours or having more placements hours spread throughout the degree. Student focused alternatives need to be considered to ensure entry into social work is fairer which also allows for self-care to be developed and practised.

10. Having It All: Being a Tenured Academic

I have been fortunate to benefit from access to higher education and a professional life which has been rewarding and enriching. I am now a social worker and have a permanent academic role which I am grateful for. However, I am yet to wear the title of social worker with comfort; it still feels like a pair of tight shoes. I believe this is because I am unsure if social work can currently honour its claim to social justice (Hosken 2018). I believe the contradictions presented to students by the ASWEAS, impact on the credibility and overall identity of the profession. Whilst I am not an anarchist, the rigidity of the ASWEAS has made me reflect on the bureaucratic nature of the profession and how this seems to self-propagate rules. During my placement I reflected:

"In assuming more rules, can we really assume more consistency occurs? The more rules that are in place, the more opportunity exists for alienating or excluding those who, for whatever reason break them. In keeping and playing by the rules, is social work in fact enacting unfair social systems, in direct contradiction with its aims and goals?"

My experience of the ASWEAS taught me that abiding by rules was of utmost importance to achieving my dream of becoming a tenured lecturer even if the rule contradicted the social justice aims of social work. As a mature student and practitioner, I know that sometimes rules need to be bent and that this can be an important component to social work practice (Mullaly 2010). However, the current discourse within the ASWEAS focuses instead on the importance of fitting in, ensuring you meet the rules and requirements of the degree despite your personal circumstances.

My working class, rural beginning ensured I was never going to be a "nice girl from a nice home" in the eyes of social work. However, I am not an imposter and I have written this deeply personal experience to shed light on the experience of non-traditional students in social work. My experience as a student, educator and field liaison in social work tells me that we need greater rigour and commitment in teaching social justice. This will not occur using arbitrary rules about supervision standards, placement hours or skills-based learning. Instead, a social change agenda can be demonstrated in revising the ASWEAS to ensure more critical approaches to curriculum are developed across all Australian Universities and new, flexible models are developed to field placement. Rather than teaching contradictions, I hope in my own practice to illuminate alternative perspectives on the ASWEAS which focus on the inclusion of all students.

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