Open Research Online
The Open University's repository of research publications
and other research outputs

Developing social work students' professional identity: the role of England's Professional Capabilities Framework

Journal Item

How to cite:

Wiles, Fran (2017). Developing social work students' professional identity: the role of England's Professional Capabilities Framework. European Journal of Social Work, 20(3) pp. 349–360.

ⓒ 2017 Informa UK Limited

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/13691457.2017.1314935

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data policy on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

Title page

Developing social work students' professional identity: the role of England's Professional Capabilities Framework.

[6988 words total]

Submitted by:

Fran Wiles, Senior Lecturer in Social Work, The Open University.

Fran Wiles is a senior lecturer on the BA Social Work Programme at The Open University, and Assistant Head of Department. Email: fran.wiles@open.ac.uk

Developing social work students' professional identity: the role of England's Professional Capabilities Framework.

6988 words total

Abstract

Developing professional identity is a key aim of social work education. This paper argues that the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) – a holistic, capability approach to student assessment used in England's social work education programmes – is ideally placed to promote the development of students' professional identities. The paper discusses two research studies, each of which was stimulated by significant policy changes in England's social work profession. The author draws out the implications of both studies for supporting social work students to develop their professional identities. It is concluded that the PCF is valued by practice educators as an assessment and teaching tool, while acknowledging that its future is uncertain due to the lack of continuity impacting on England's social work profession. This paper is equally of relevance for social work educators outside the UK who may be developing and evaluating their assessment approaches; and also for those experiencing the impact of rapid policy changes in their own countries.

Key words: professional identity; holistic assessment; capability approach; social work education.

Introduction

This paper considers the findings of two small research projects concerned with the development of professional identity: a key aim of social work education. Wiles (2010) investigated students' experiences of professional registration which had been introduced, along with a new social work degree, in 2003. Lawson's research (2015a; 2015b) evaluated the newly introduced Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) – a holistic set of standards used in England's social work education programmes. I will argue that the PCF is ideally

placed to promote the development of students' professional identities. Three elements are key to this endeavour: the role of the practice educator in modelling, sharing and assessing professional behaviours; the importance of critical reflection; and the relevance of the workplace as a community of practice.

These research messages must, however, be considered in the light of rapid and destabilising policy changes for England's social work profession. Both professional registration and the PCF were introduced as part of a strategic response to perceived failings in social work practice. Crises of this kind can have a profound influence on professionals' identity. I therefore begin by locating the two research studies within their policy context. Next I discuss the methodology and findings of each study in turn. In reporting Wiles' study I show how the initial analysis prompted a further exploration of the literature on professional identity, examples of which are discussed at this point. In reporting Lawson's study, I include a brief explanation of the PCF and a discussion about its merits as a holistic, capability approach to student assessment. Bringing both sets of findings together, I then draw out implications for supporting social work students to develop their professional identities in the workplace. Finally, I conclude that the PCF is valued by practice educators as an assessment and teaching tool, while acknowledging that its future is uncertain due to the lack of continuity impacting on England's social work profession.

This paper is equally of relevance for social work educators outside England who may be developing and evaluating their assessment approaches; and also for those experiencing the impact of rapid policy changes in their own countries.

Policy background: social work in crisis (again)

Social work in England has been in a continual process of change during the past two decades, which can be partly traced to neoliberal policies evident elsewhere in Europe (as well as in Australia and New Zealand). On the other hand, it has been suggested that government influence on social work is more extensive in England, compared with other countries (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014). There is some merit in this argument when one compares the extremely frequent policy changes in England's social work with the rest of the UK (Ixer, 2013).

In the late 1990s, reports of major shortcomings in social services led to the creation of a UK wide Social Work Degree and four social work regulatory bodies in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Professional registration - implemented from 2003 and compulsory from 2005 - had long been an aspiration of the British Association of Social Workers, and was generally welcomed as a recognition of professional status (Wiles, 2010).

In late 2008, news of the death of 17-month-old Peter Connolly sparked extensive and hostile media coverage of social workers and their perceived failings. The Labour government's response to this crisis in both practice and morale influenced the next raft of social work reform. Lord Laming's review of child protection arrangements (2009) and the Social Work Task Force (2009) recommended developments including a College of Social Work to enhance professional standards and identity; and the Professional Capabilities Framework as a comprehensive and holistic set of standards to guide recruitment, assessment and post-qualifying development. These proposals were welcomed by the profession as an opportunity to play a greater role in shaping its own future and development.

Professional confidence plummeted again in mid-2010, when the newly elected Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government announced the abolition of England's social work regulator, the General Social Care Council. This was experienced as a threat to

professional identity as regulation passed, two years later, to a generic regulator for health allied professions. Plans nevertheless progressed for the College which opened in early 2012. One of its earliest achievements was to introduce the PCF which formed the policy impetus for Lawson's 2014 research. Subsequent developments, however, have continued to challenge the identity of social work in England and are summarised here.

One contributing feature is the growing divergence between social work with children and families (increasingly focussing on child protection) and social work relating to various categories of adults. In addition to separate local and national management (whereas the rest of the UK emphasises integration), the government has supported a separate structure of qualifying training and career progression. Since the 1970s, social work qualifying programmes have been designed to train generic practitioners who can work with families and individuals of any age. Recently, however, the government has encouraged the expansion of specialist employment-based and 'fast track' qualifying routes which focus on either children's social work or adult mental health. This is controversial, with opponents expressing doubt that a reduced timeframe can enable students to develop the critically reflective abilities required to work with complexity, and concern that early specialisation produces social workers who may take a narrow approach.

Another source of tension is that the coalition government – and from 2015 the conservative government - has continued to commission further reports on the state of social work. The Munro review of child protection (2011) reinforced the professional advances set in train by the Social Work Task Force; later reviews, however, have had a destabilising effect on social work identity. In 2014, two reports were commissioned within weeks of each other by separate government departments. In summary, Sir Martin Narey's (2014) review of the education of children's social workers, commissioned by the Department for Education, found university curricula too theoretical and argued for specialist training to provide

practical knowledge for child protection social workers. In contrast, Professor David Croisdale-Appleby's review of social work education, commissioned by the Department of Health, advocated for a more nuanced and rounded knowledge, asserting (2014, p.19) that 'social work education and training should be directed at producing social workers whose professional profile is comprised of three components: the social worker as a practitioner, the social worker as a professional, and the social worker as a social scientist'. In this sense, Croisdale-Appleby's conclusions were aligned with the views of the profession, whereas Narey's reflected government discourse. The government's response to the two reports (Department of Education, 2014; Department of Health, 2014) reinforced the expansion of fast-track specialist qualifying routes; and announced the publication of specialist 'knowledge and skills statements' (KSS) – sitting alongside the PCF - for social workers working with children and families, and a new requirement for children's social workers to pass a post-qualification test to gain full practitioner status.

Professional confidence was further undermined in June 2015 when the College of Social Work announced its closure due to financial losses. Concerns escalated when, in September 2015, the newly elected conservative government announced another wave of radical reforms to children and families social work and other children's services. At the time of writing the future of these proposals is uncertain because they have been strongly criticised by the House of Commons Education Committee (2016), a cross-party parliamentary scrutiny group. What is clear from this brief overview, however, is England's continually shifting policy landscape. This forms part of the backdrop to professional identity, to which I now turn.

Meanings of professional identity: a resource for students' identity work

The first piece of research is a small-scale qualitative doctoral study (Wiles, 2010) which explored whether the requirement to demonstrate professional suitability in both personal and professional life (a condition of registration) had any implications for social work students' personal and professional identities. The research was conducted between 2007 and 2010, at a time when professional registration in the UK was still at a relatively early stage and not without controversy (McLaughlin, 2007). It should be noted that, following regulatory changes, social work students in England are no longer eligible for professional registration; nevertheless, they are still required to rigorously demonstrate their fitness to practise in all areas of life. The research methodology took a post-structuralist approach to discourse and identity (Hall, 1996). Here, discourse refers to powerful representations of social phenomena as 'true', and the associated social and institutional practices as logical and inevitable. The research treated identity as a fluid concept, constructed in relation to changing discourses and discursive practices; in this sense, professional identity is one of the multiple subjectivities that a person occupies across their day-to-day lives.

With permission from the University's ethics panel, all students undertaking the second or final level of the Social Work degree were invited to participate. The programme was a large, employment-based distance learning one, but despite a cohort of some 500 students, recruiting participants proved to be extremely difficult; this may have been partly due to the sensitivity of the topic and/ or the considerable workload demands for the students. Eventually seven people volunteered: one second year and six final year students. The participants, aged between the late twenties and early fifties, were three men and four women. Two had grown up outside the European Union, and five in the UK. Three students depicted their family backgrounds as working class or economically disadvantaged. All

participants were sponsored by statutory sector employers in adult social care, child care, housing, education and mental health.

The study used semi-structured interviews, lasting between sixty and ninety minutes, to explore the discourses that students drew on to talk about four topics: their experiences of social work education; examples from their practice placements which illustrated their conceptualisation of personal and professional identity; how they described themselves in private life and as developing professionals; the personal consequences of their transition from 'lay person' to 'qualified social worker'; and their experiences of professional registration and understanding of its implications. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed in full.

Using a method of discourse analysis influenced by both Foucauldian theory and conversation analysis, the interview transcripts were manually searched to identify recurring 'patterns' in participants' talk. This approach is based on the methodological assumption that people's talk reflects a complex interweaving of the immediate context (the interview) and wider social debates (Billig, 1987); cultural and social meanings thus provide 'discursive resources' for constructing identity.

As the analysis progressed, it became evident that not only did participants struggle to define 'professional identity', but their attempts varied widely. To make sense of this it was necessary to consult the extensive body of writing about professional identity from the fields of teaching and nursing, as well as social work. This revealed that there is no single meaning of the term professional identity; rather, it is a concept that can be employed for different purposes. I now go on to discuss the various meanings found in the social work academic and

policy literature, illustrated with examples from the interview transcripts which show how students utilise them.

Troman (2007), discussing research about teachers' identities, suggests that in the 1950s and 1960s there was an interest in using the sociological 'trait theory' to establish what features an occupation should have in order to be termed a profession. Trait theory is still evident in documents such as assessment frameworks and curriculum guidance, and these convey powerful discursive resources which influence professional identity. In Wiles' research all participants utilised the notion of professional traits to some extent, referring to their learning in terms of standards, values, altruism, expertise, professional codes and autonomy. Two students said, for example:

> [I have gained] you know, the grounding in the theory and the knowledge …. to give [my] opinions some sort of backing

> I feel like I'm a professional social worker because I'm given a high degree of autonomy

> (Wiles, 2012, p. 858).

Another common usage of the term 'professional identity' is to convey a collective sense of what it means to be a social worker. Some accounts argue that the social work profession is distinguished from others by unique attributes such as its value base or holistic approach. This may incorporate aspects of the trait approach, although ideas about social work's 'uniqueness' depend on the author's perspective. One example from the UK is the extent to which social work should or can reflect radical and critical perspectives (Ferguson and Woodward, 2009). The move towards multi-agency working has led to the suggestion that 'professional identity is more fluid and perhaps fragmented than ever before … [particularly within] the context of multi-disciplinary settings' (Dutton and Worsley, 2009, p.151). In

particular, it is often reported that social workers perceive their professional identity being undermined in these contexts (Barnes et al., 2000; Moran et al., 2006). This literature also examines professional identity in relation to particular practice settings such as the fields of mental health, family support or child protection. These discussions are valuable and important in their own right, but the following quote (Wiles, 2012, p. 859) illustrates how one student uses their awareness of such debates to forge their own sense of professional identity:

> In the community mental health team … all the professionals seem to be doing very similar jobs. … Does that mean that in five years time social workers will be a mental health kind of professional rather than specifically a social worker?

A third approach to professional identity is to consider its subjective meaning for each individual. In Wiles' data (2012, pp. 860-861), the interview transcripts reveal a sense of students' individual journeys towards professional identity which are fluid, personal and still in process:

> In your thinking, you're a social worker. Your understanding [and] knowledge you have gained as a social worker rubs [off] in your personal life as well. Even though it's your personal identity, your thinking has changed from your learning;

and

> [Being a social worker is] part of your identity really; I suppose it is part of me.

A further source of professional identity is personal experience, for example derived from gender and social class (Lewis, 2004; Warde, 2009). Interrogating one's own personal values, and understanding how they interact with professional ones, is considered imperative for professional identity (Lindsey, 2005; Wong and Pearson, 2007). This requires challenging identity work: Wiles found that students talked about their developing professional identities

10

as a source of tension in their changing relationships with family and friends. New learning required them to reconcile conflicting cultural discourses about issues such as gender roles and political beliefs:

> I get criticised … for being too like a social worker. My [friend] often says to me 'oh you're a typical social worker' because I have a view about something which he wouldn't have had. … [We] can talk about football, we can talk about music. But then other issues, world issues, we just don't talk about because we can't. We're poles apart (Wiles, 2012, p. 861).

Finally, the literature about students of teaching and medicine argue that professionals construct their identities in relation to government policy and other discourses (Nicoll and Harrison, 2003). This approach has less frequently been applied to social work, but given the shifts described earlier, it seems likely that social work policies do influence the development of professional identity both explicitly and implicitly.

Summing up the key points of Wiles' research, it is argued that the variations in students' talk reflect the diverse ways in which professional identity is conceptualised within the social work community and in society more broadly; and that these act as discursive resources for students to construct their own unique professional identities. I now turn to the second study which offers further insight into how this process can be encouraged.

Evaluating the advantages of a holistic, capability approach to student assessment

Lawson's project (2015a; 2015b) took place during 2014, exploring the use of the PCF on the same qualifying course studied by Wiles. Before discussing the methodology and findings, it will be helpful to outline the key features of this new professional standards framework.

After a series of morale-sapping crises and media attacks on social work in England, the PCF offered a new opportunity to reclaim the role of professional judgement. It represents a shift from competence to capability; from occupation to profession; and from a narrow focus on skills to holistic assessment (Lawson and Wiles, 2015).

An innovative feature is that the PCF has been designed for use with both students and qualified practitioners. It progressively specifies the skills, knowledge and values expected at every stage of a social worker's career and professional development. Consistency is provided by nine overarching and interdependent 'domains' (or areas of capability) which reflect the complexity of social work practice and the interplay of knowledge, skills and values:

1. **Professionalism** – Identify and behave as a professional social worker, committed to professional development

2. **Values and ethics** – Apply social work ethical principles and values to guide professional practice

3. **Diversity** – Recognise diversity and apply anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive principles in practice

4. **Rights, Justice and Economic Wellbeing** – Advance human rights and promote social justice and economic wellbeing

5. **Knowledge** – Apply knowledge of social sciences, law and social work practice theory

6. **Critical reflection and analysis** – Apply critical reflection and analysis to inform and provide a rationale for professional decision-making

7. **Intervention and skills** – Use judgement and authority to intervene with individuals, families and communities to promote independence, provide support and prevent harm, neglect and abuse

8. **Contexts and organisations** – Engage with, inform, and adapt to changing contexts that shape practice. Operate effectively within own organisational frameworks and contribute to the development of services and organisations

9. **Professional leadership** – Take responsibility for the professional learning and development of others through supervision, mentoring, assessing, research, teaching, leadership and management.

(BASW, 2016).

In addition to the domains, the PCF contains nine progression points representing professional development across a social worker's career; this begins with four 'student' levels (specifying entry criteria and the expectations for each year of qualifying education), followed by five 'qualified practitioner' stages from newly qualified through to senior/strategic level.

A second key feature of the PCF is that it has been designed to be used holistically. Holistic assessment requires 'a conceptual framework that enables us to see the relationship between the parts and the whole' (Biggs and Tang, 2007, p. 215). The nine domains are intentionally overlapping and interdependent rather than separate. Moreover, detailed descriptions of capability within each domain are used diagnostically to help identify strengths and areas for development, rather than as a checklist of areas for which evidence must be produced. This was a deliberate departure from the previous competence-based National Occupational Standards used across the UK since 2003. Competency frameworks have long been a matter

of debate in professional education programmes (for example, Dominelli 1996). Cooper (2008, p.226) maintains that:

> a functional analysis of concrete, observable tasks and behaviours is simply inappropriate for complex 'professional activities'; … it ignores the potential for professional judgement, takes no account of group processes and has no regard for the influence of social context or setting.

Support for replacing 'competences' with 'capabilities' is derived from well-established arguments. Cooper (2008, p.231) locates the origins of the capability approach in the socio-cultural concept of situated learning:

> the capability approach seems to recognise that professional practices are enacted by individual people, as part of social relationships, within complex situated environments. … The capability literature offers the potential for a more dynamic holism. It sets out to link 'knowing' with 'doing'… the ability to demonstrate expertise in action'.

Its proponents argue that the dynamic nature of capability equips students and social workers to adapt their skills to fast changing organisational environments, and to take responsibility for their own careers and future learning. A consequence of the holistic approach is that, especially when dealing with complex work, greater weight must be afforded to the professional judgement of the assessor (Biggs and Tang, 2007) in making a nuanced decision about the quality of the student's performance. This increased focus on professional judgement is consistent with the drive to enhance the status of social workers'

professionalism, embodied in the Social Work Task Force recommendations. Having outlined the main features and implications of the PCF, I will now discuss Lawson's methodology and findings, drawing on Lawson (2015a and 2015b).

The aim was to evaluate the PCF, in its first year of implementation, by seeking the views of practice educators and supervisors. In England, practice educators have a dual role of teaching and assessing students, and must be qualified social work practitioners. They may work alongside the student in the practice placement, directly supervising their work; or they may be 'long-arm' practice educators who are independent of the placement agency. The supervisors were generally qualified practitioners who oversaw the student's work on a day to day basis, in cases where the practice educator was situated off-site. For convenience, both sets of respondents are referred to here as practice educators.

In developing the methodology Lawson, herself a university tutor, consulted with other members of the university team involved with practice learning. It was agreed that, within the constraints of limited resources, the most pragmatic method would be a questionnaire designed to capture both quantitative and qualitative data (through the inclusion of open questions) at the mid-point of the student's placement.

The College of Social Work had not offered detailed guidance on how the PCF should be used for student assessment, other than emphasising the importance of the practice educator's holistic judgement. The questionnaire was designed to investigate the PCF's value as an assessment tool, as well as its potential for supporting the teaching element of the placement. This included open-ended questions about supporting and assessing students who were at risk of failing, thus reflecting a concern expressed by university tutors that the PCF would not be precise enough to assess students in these circumstances. Recalling Cooper's (2008) criticism that competence–based assessment frameworks lead to a technical and over-simplified

approach to social work practice, other questions were framed to explore whether using a holistic, capability approach would help to progress a more person-centred, relationship-based practice. Finally, given that the rationale behind the PCF was to raise the status of social work and encourage responsibility for professionalism, questions were included to explore how far the PCF helps students develop a sense of professional identity. It was anticipated that many practice educators and supervisors would have previously assessed students using the previous framework (National Occupational Standards), and thus the questionnaire offered respondents the opportunity to make comparisons between the two frameworks.

After obtaining ethical permission, twenty practice educators and supervisors were invited to complete the questionnaires half way through the student placement. Subsequently, an opportunity arose to distribute the questionnaire to an additional 29 respondents (22 practice educators and supervisors and seven university tutors) after the practice placement had ended. All 49 questionnaires were returned. Finally, as an additional source of triangulation, the researcher read a total of 26 student practice assessment portfolios (including some from a second university), and had follow up conversations with the practice educators whose students who had failed their placement.

Data analysis involved scrutinising and manually coding the questionnaire responses to reveal the main themes. I now go on to discuss Lawson's findings.

Almost 96% of respondents (n=47) found the PCF preferable to its competence-based predecessor, and reported that it was easy to use as an assessment tool. Some commented that the PCF domains were relevant for any practice setting, and that opportunities for assessment arose naturally from the work. This was contrasted with the previous framework which required students to complete tasks which were not necessarily part of the social work role in

every setting. The progressive structure of the PCF was reported to encourage a high standard because it offers clear guidance about what is expected from students, not only at their current level (first/final placement) but also for more advanced practice. One practice educator said, for example, that the PCF 'provides a focus which enables discussion on the next stage of learning and the student can move towards that' (Lawson, 2015b, online). Respondents identified the domains of 'professionalism' and 'values' as those where successful students performed especially well. 'Professionalism' was seen as especially important, with respondents reporting that this domain initiated reflective discussions about boundaries, conduct and what it means to be a professional. Conversely, follow up conversations with practice educators of failed students indicated that these two domains helped them to clarify and articulate the nuances of what was lacking in the student's performance. The majority of practice educators found it easy to find evidence relating to all nine domains, although 'leadership' was considered the most challenging, possibly because of unfamiliarity with the framework.

Practice educators also valued the PCF's clear structure for teaching within supervision sessions. For example, one practice educator said that the PCF's emphasis on the role of knowledge in practice had 'legitimised a robust focus on social work theory in supervision'; another wrote that, in comparison with the previous framework the PCF had made her/him more mindful of 'the integration of values and knowledge' (Lawson, 2015a, p.3). By stating expectations of capability throughout a social worker's career, the PCF was also seen to promote the ethos of continuing professional development.

Practice educators considered that using the PCF had helped to shape and improve students' practice, in the sense that the holistic framework promoted integrated, person-centred and relationship-based approaches to social work practice. An interesting finding was that practice educators and supervisors reported that using the PCF encouraged them to re-assess

and change their own practice. For example, many respondents said they had to exercise a greater degree of professional judgement in assessing a student when using the PCF. This was positively valued by respondents, enhancing their sense of professionalism.

Finally, and of particular interest for this discussion, practice educators considered that the PCF encouraged the development of students' (and in some cases, their own) professional identities. As noted above, the domain of 'professionalism' offered a particular focus in this regard. Domain five, concerned with the application of knowledge, was also felt to be crucial in building up a body of professional expertise. It was reported that the framework's emphasis on creating, as well as using, knowledge for social work practice helped both practice educators and students gain confidence in their professional identity. This was reinforced by the PCF expectation that social workers demonstrate leadership at every level of their development, which prompted students to think about how they could contribute, not just to their own professional development, but to that of the profession as a whole.

Overall, then, Lawson's study found very strong support for the PCF. In comparison with its competency-based predecessor, she concludes that while 'Statements of roles and tasks may have a place – helping social workers understand the demands of specific settings and contexts …the PCF has a crucial role to play in the identity and confidence of the profession' (Lawson, 2015b online).

Discussion and implications

What can be learned from considering the findings of these two studies? Wiles argues that students must do difficult identity work in constructing their professional identities from multiple discursive resources. Lawson's evaluation found that using the PCF as a teaching tool facilitates this development in the practice setting. Reviewing both sets of findings

highlights the important role played by the practice educator, not simply in assessing the student but also in teaching and modelling professional identity.

Supervisory and reflective processes do not take place in isolation, however, but within the context of the placement agency. This adds further complexity – and richness – to the student's practice learning experience. In the workplace, students are exposed to a range of discourses, perspectives and beliefs (White and Featherstone, 2005). Regardless of whether these meanings have positive or negative effects (such as raising or lowering morale), they nevertheless act as resources from which students construct their own unique professional identity (Wiles, 2010). This normative dimension of the practice setting is sometimes referred to as a 'community of practice'. This concept, developed by Wenger (1998), provides a useful perspective on the role of informal, non-assessed workplace learning in developing professional identity.

Wenger argues that within the workplace, co-workers develop a shared repertoire of meanings and practices which continually shape and define the professional community. This enables novices to be socialised into professional values and norms. Students achieve this by gradually taking on professional roles, experiencing themselves - and being accepted by others – as social workers. It is important to recognise that students will be exposed to a range of explicit and implicit meanings about social work, not only in the workplace and university, but also within their own families, communities and society as a whole. It is in the practice setting that students learn to make sense of these different discourses. While workplace learning may be informal and tacit, the practice educator has an important role in making the learning explicit by encouraging the student to reflect on the experience.

Another way of representing the student's identity work in the practice setting is to use educationalist Jack Mezirow's concept of a 'perspective transformation'. Rooted in

Mezirow's theories of transformative learning (1978), this concept describes what happens when adults are faced with a learning experience which causes them to re-evaluate long-established beliefs and personal frames of reference. In social work education:

> 'Perspective transformation' can be used to explain what some social work students experience when working in practice for the first time. They can be shocked to find that, for example, there are not clear answers to every problem, that the society we live in is not fair, that a great many families live in appalling social conditions through no fault of their own and so on (Lawson, 2014, p.2).

Mezirow (1994) argues that achieving perspective transformation requires even more than this: the learner needs to engage in 'critical' reflection. This requires students to dig deeper and become 'aware of, and alert to, the external and internal constraints and forces that prevent us from seeing the world as it really is' (Rolfe et al., 2010 p.7). At this stage, therefore, the student learns to take nothing for granted; and Lawson (2014, p.2) suggests that even 'the different knowledges that are used in social work … should be scrutinised and evaluated' along with the assumptions which underpin beliefs and behaviours. Wiles' research highlights that students need the same criticality in weighing up different discursive messages about professional identity, and developing their own sense of what it means to be a social worker. Given its potentially disruptive effects, it is not surprising that undertaking critical reflection benefits from practice educators' 'crucial role in helping students develop the personal knowledge created through deep reflection and this can only occur when students feel safe and supported' through regular and planned supervision (Lawson, 2014, p.12).

So far, then, I have argued that the PCF's holistic and developmental approach appears to facilitate the challenging identity work that students must undertake in the workplace, with

the support of their practice educator. I have suggested that each individual constructs their professional identity by drawing on a range of cultural and social meanings or discursive resources. Examples found in the professional and academic literature, discussed in this paper, include discourses about desired traits; and narratives about social work's distinctive characteristics as a whole profession, or in a specific setting. Reflection on personal experience is also a resource for constructing professional identity.

A less explored resource for social workers' identity is the influence of national context. Although there are many similarities and common values and goals, social work does not mean the same thing in every country (Weiss-Gal and Welbourne, 2008). It seems likely, therefore, that nation-specific meanings contribute to practitioners' and students' professional identities (Wiles, 2015). In this respect, discursive resources may relate to: the particular roles and activities undertaken by social workers in any given country; whether or not social work is regulated; the organisational and community context; and differences in training and status. The relationship between social work and the state might also be relevant; for example, the extent to which social work is seen as part of welfare provision; or whether social workers align themselves with state goals. I would suggest that in England, the ever-changing policy context is an under-explored influence on social workers' identity. Nicoll and Harrison's (2003) argument, that policy and guidance documents act as powerful discursive resources which define 'good' and 'professional' practice, rings especially true here.

Harrison and Ruch (2007 online) differentiate between 'having a professional identity' and – preferable in their view - 'being and sustaining a professional self'. They suggest that an identity based solely in relation to regulatory processes and competency statements is too narrow. Instead, they argue that social workers 'need to develop internalised professional identities on which they can draw when work challenges them'. The PCF was welcomed as a means to encourage integrated, person-centred, nuanced and critically reflective social work:

qualities that were missing from the previous competence-based framework. This discursive shift may, however, be short lived. With the recent introduction of alternative frameworks offering greater 'role and task' precision for the assessment of newly qualified social workers, the usefulness of the PCF has been brought into question. Worryingly, the growing focus on practical and measurable knowledge, for example in child protection work, seems to represent regression to a more restricted sense of professional identity.

Conclusion

I have discussed the implications of two pieces of research which explored, in different ways, how students learn about professional identity. Professional registration and the PCF remain current, despite policy changes since each study was conducted, and thus the findings continue to have relevance. A clear message is that, in England, the PCF is valued by those using it to assess, teach and learn. According to the evidence presented here, the effective features of the PCF are its holistic approach, and its roots in a capability (rather than competency) approach. It would appear that these characteristics, as Lawson (2015b, online) observes, 'have enabled it to convey the fusion of different aspects of what it means to be an effective practitioner and this has been more meaningful to practitioners and practice educators than previous lists of standards and statements'.

This paper also indirectly offers some commentary about the way in which discourses of social work professionalism and identity – and the assessment of practitioners - are continually contested. These observations may be familiar to social work educators from other countries, and in this respect England only serves as an illustration. Significant policy changes have been described, which highlight tensions and conflicts in how the heart of social work is defined. It is sobering to realise that, regardless of their origins, professional

discourses can be appropriated and adapted to serve dominant interests (Cribb and Gewirtz,

2015). The final learning from this paper, perhaps, is to underline the importance of having

professional organisations in which social workers' experiences and voices can be heard.

References

Barnes, D., Carpenter, J. and Dickinson, C. (2000) 'Interprofessional education for community mental health: attitudes to community care and professional stereotypes', Social Work Education, Vol.19, No.6, pp. 565-583.

Biggs, J. and Tang, C. (2007) Teaching for Quality Learning at University, 4th edition, Buckingham, SHRE and OU.

Billig, M. (1987) Arguing and thinking: A rhetorical approach to social psychology, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

British Association of Social Work (2016) Professional Capabilities Framework [Online]. Available at https://www.basw.co.uk/pcf/ (Accessed 21 June 2016).

Cooper, B. (2008) 'Continuing professional development: a critical approach' in Fraser, A.W. and Matthews, S. (eds) The Critical Practitioner in Social Work and Health Care, London, Sage, pp. 222-38.

Cribb, A. and Gewirtz, S. (2015) Professionalism, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Croisdale-Appleby. D. (2014) Re-visioning social work education: an independent review [Online]. Available at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-work-education-review (Accessed 16 August, 2016).

Department for Education (2014) 'Response to Sir Martin Narey's report on training for children's social workers' [Online]. Available at https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nareys-report-on-initial-training-for-childrens-social-workers (Accessed 16 August, 2016).

Department of Health (2014) Taking forward Professor Croisdale-Appleby's review of social work education [Online]. Available at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-work-education-progress (Accessed 16 August, 2016).

Dominelli, L. (1996) 'De-professionalising social work: anti-oppressive practice, competencies and postmodernism', British Journal of Social Work, 26 (2), 153-175.

Dutton. A. and Worsley, A. (2009) 'Doves and hawks: practice educators' attitudes towards interprofessional learning', Learning in Health and Social Care, Vol.8, No.3, pp.145-153.

Ferguson, I. and Woodward, R. (2009) Radical Social Work in Practice: Making a Difference, Bristol, The Policy Press.

Hall, S. (1996) 'Who needs 'identity?' in S. Hall and P. du Gay, Questions of Cultural Identity, London, Sage.

Harrison, K. and Ruch (2007) 'Social Work and the Use of the Self: On Becoming and Being a Social Worker', in M. Lymbery and K. Postle (eds) Social Work: A Companion to Learning

[Online], Sage, Available at http://sk.sagepub.com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/books/social-work-mark-lymbery (Accessed 15 April 2016).

House of Commons Education Committee (2016) Social Work Reform [Online]. Available at https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/education-committee/inquiries/parliament-2015/children-social-work-reform-15-16/ (Accessed 16 August, 2016).

Ixer, G. (2013) 'Fifty years of professional regulation in social work education' in J. Parker and M. Doel (eds) Professional Social Work, London, Learning Matters.

Laming, Lord H. (2009) The protection of children in England: A progress report. London. The Stationery Office.

Lawson, H. (2014) 'Promoting Reflection in Practice: the role of the Practice Educator', Community Care Inform, [Online]. Available at http://www.ccinform.co.uk/guides/guide-to-promoting-reflection-in-practice-the-role-of-the-practice-educator/ (Accessed 28.10.15).

Lawson, H. (2015a) An Evaluation of the Professional Capabilities Framework, 2014: some preliminary findings, Unpublished.

Lawson, H. (2015b) 'There is evidence the PCF is important for social worker identity', Community Care, 22 July [Online], http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2015/07/22/evidence-pcf-important-social-worker-identity/ (Accessed 29.10.15)

Lawson, H. and Wiles, F. (2015) 'Teaching and learning social work in the practice setting: reflecting on the effectiveness of the Professional Capability Framework in England' (European Association of Schools of Social Work Conference, 29 June – 2 July 2015, Bicocca University, Milan, Italy.

Lewis, I. (2004) 'Gender and professional identity: A qualitative study of social workers practising as counsellors and psychotherapists', Australian Social Work, Vol.57, No.4, pp.394-407.

Lindsey, E. (2005) 'Study Abroad and Values Development in Social Work Students, Journal of Social Work Education, Vol.41, No.2, pp.229-249.

McLaughlin, K. (2007) 'Regulation and Risk in Social Work: The General Social Care Council and the Social Care Register in Context', British Journal of Social Work, Vol.37, No.7, pp.1263–1277.

Mezirow, J. (1978) 'Perspective transformation', Adult Education, 28, 100-110.

Mezirow, J. (1994) 'Understanding transformation theory', Adult Education Quarterly, 44(4), 222-232.

Moran, P. Jacobs, C., Bunn, A. and Bifulco, A. (2007) 'Multi-agency working: implications for an early-intervention social work team', Child and Family Social Work, Vol.12, No.2, pp.143-151.

Munro E (2011). The Munro review of child protection: final report – a child-centred System [Online]. Available at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/munro-review-of-child-protection-final-report-a-child-centred-system (Accessed 16 August, 2016).

Narey, M. (2014) Making the education of social workers consistently effective [Online]. Available at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/making-the-education-of-social-workers-consistently-effective (Accessed 16 August, 2016).

Nicoll, K. and Harrison, R. (2003) 'Constructing the Good Teacher in Higher Education: the discursive work of standards', Studies in Continuing Education, Vol.25, No.1, pp.23-35.

Rolfe, G., Jasper, M. and Freshwater, D. (2010) Critical Reflection in Practice generating knowledge for care, 2nd ed., Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan.

Social Work Task Force (2009) Building a Safe, Confident Future: the final report of the Social Work Taskforce, [Online] http://publications.education.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/01114-2009DOM-EN.pdf (Accessed 06.01.10).

Troman, G. (2007) 'Research on teachers' work and teacher professionalism: a short history', annex in I. Hextall, S. Gewirtz,, A. Cribb and P. Mahoney, Changing Teacher Roles, Identities and Professionalism: An Annotated Bibliography, [Online] Available at http://www.kcl.ac.uk/content/1/c6/01/41/56/bibliography.pdf (Accessed 10.02.10).

Warde, B. (2009) 'Male Social Workers in Child Welfare: A Qualitative Analysis', Child Welfare, Vol.88, No.4, pp 113-133.

Weiss-Gal, I. and Welbourne, P. (2008) 'The professionalisation of social work: a cross-national exploration', International Journal of Social Welfare, Vol.17, No.4, pp.281–290.

Wenger, E. (1998) Communities of Practice: learning, meaning and identity, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

White, S. and Featherstone. B. (2005) 'Communicating misunderstandings: multi-agency work as social practice', Child and Family Social Work, Vol. 10, No.3, pp. 207–216.

Wiles, F. (2010) Professional registration and the discursive construction of social work students' identities, unpublished EdD thesis, http://oro.open.ac.uk/view/person/fw6.html

Wiles, F. (2012) ''Not easily put into a box: constructing professional identity', Social Work Education, Vol 32, No.7, pp854-866.

Wiles, F. (2015) 'Four nations: how has devolution affected social work education and discourses of professional identity across the UK (Joint Social Work Education Conference, The Open University, July 2015).

Wong, Y. and Pearson, V. (2007) 'Mission Possible; Building Social Work Professional Identity through Fieldwork Placements in China', Social Work Education, Vol.26, No.3, pp.292-310.