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# ‘When David Bowie created Ziggy Stardust’

## Reconceptualising workplace learning for social workers

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**Abstract:** This article draws on phenomenological research offering new insights into workplace learning for social workers. The qualitative study explored social workers’ experiences of learning in the workplace. The structure, texture and meaning of these lived experiences were described using sensory details and striking metaphors. Drawing on the study findings, a web model for reconceptualising workplace learning for social workers is introduced. This web is woven from connected themes: journey of the self; navigating landscape and place; navigating tasks; learning through others; learning through the body; practices and conceptions of learning; and learning by chance. The discussion will show the complexity of social workers’ experiences and how understanding these can foster effective workplace professional learning. Workplace learning needs valued beyond rhetoric in professional development strategies. The research restores the importance of direct practice as a primary career-long and career-wide professional learning solution.

**Keywords:** workplace learning; social work; phenomenology; lived experiences; professional learning; professional development

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## Introduction

This article explores recent qualitative research about the nature of social workers' lived experiences of learning in the workplace. Social workers provided rich accounts of their learning experiences using sensory detail and striking metaphors. This Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study found that social workers' learning in the workplace is a complex, intricate web of physical and emotional elements while learners navigate places, spaces and tasks. The web encapsulates seven superordinate themes from the findings: journey of the self; navigating landscape and place; navigating tasks; learning through others; learning through the body; practices and conceptions of learning; and learning by chance (Ferguson, 2021, p.154). The threads of the relationship between themes form uniquely individual webs deeply connected to social workers' embodied experiences of learning and the work opportunities that they undertake. The small-scale study was undertaken in Scotland however the findings promote a broader understanding of how social workers learn through work tasks in their practice landscape. The findings sit at the intersection of knowledge about workplace and professional learning. Drawing on relevant literature, contextual information and the study findings, the article demonstrates why workplace learning is a vital element of continuing professional development for social workers as part of strategic, organisational and individual practices.

## Context and rationale

In Scotland, like many other countries social work practice takes place in an increasingly complex, policy and legal context that is ambiguous and unpredictable. Social work education and continuing professional learning (CPL) aims to prepare and develop social workers' practice in this context. Within the United Kingdom (UK) each nation has a different framework and regulatory system for social work education and CPL. Although there are strong similarities in fundamental principles, there are differences in how regulatory frameworks influence practice, planning for and investment in CPL (Kettle *et al.*, 2016).

Social work education and CPL in Scotland is regulated by the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) under the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act

(2001). There is no current post-qualifying learning framework in Scotland, although there are requirements to maintain CPL for registration as a social worker (SSSC, 2017). Social workers need to undertake a minimum of 90 hours learning over each three-year registration period including in relation to the protection of children and adults. There is work underway to develop a new Advanced Practice framework and development of a National Care Service with implications for the profession (Scottish Government, 2022).

At the start of the research, I was a leading work in local authority, learning and organisational development, with responsibility for the CPL of social workers. A workplace learning lens was a priority in developing the study to contribute to knowledge about social work professional learning from this perspective. Articulating social work is fraught with ambiguity (Daniel, 2013; Moriarty *et al.*, 2015). It is therefore also difficult to articulate what social workers need to learn and plan effective workplace strategies. Rhetoric and policy promote formal, informal, self-directed and incidental learning for CPL. However, reliance on, and value ascribed to, direct training, or formal learning remain the default in workforce development activities as outcomes appear tangible, measurable and visible (SSSC, 2020). This means that some of social workers' most significant learning experiences can be ignored.

The study origins were twofold: motivation to provide meaningful learning opportunities to support social workers develop practice; and frustration at recurring emphasis on provision of formal training to address practice issues at national and local levels. From the organisational development role, I was also interested in applying workplace learning theory to the above challenges.

## Literature review

Social work draws from diverse fields about individual learning, learning cultures and organisational learning. Many aspects of professional learning at pre and post qualifying stage, are characterised by a focus on the respective frameworks or standards in the nation in which social workers qualify (Moriarty *et al.* 2014; Daniel *et al.*, 2016; Gordon *et al.*, 2019). Workplace learning, although highlighted, is often linked to the pre-qualifying or newly qualified stages of practice. Welch, *et al.* (2014) found that training and development are acknowledged by both managers and

social workers as including learning on the job. Grant *et al.* (2022) report that workplace learning opportunities are not equitable to social workers and there are sparse resources allocated to workforce development. The importance of infrastructure to support and sustain professional learning within the workplace is stressed. Gordon *et al.* (2019) additionally found that there was a high value placed on learning through work, including self-directed and reflective learning, practice discussions and supervision but these learning opportunities were not consistent for practitioners.

Gould positions social work practice as the 'crucible of learning' within the complex arena of individual and organisational learning (Gould, 2004, p.4). The term shared professional learning (Kettle *et al.*, 2016), articulates the situated nature of this across settings and career. Workplace practice is likely to be central to the experience of social workers' learning, although currently rhetoric and reality do not align. An ideal learning organisation is far from the practitioner's reality (Skinner and Whyte, 2004; Beddoe, 2009). Webster-Wright (2009) proposes that although rhetoric has changed it had no impact on professional development practices delivering 'content rather than enhancing learning' (Webster-Wright, 2009, p.702). These findings are echoed by Grant, (2017) citing limited development opportunities and supervision processes which focused on workload management.

Workplace learning takes many forms and can be understood as any learning associated with the job (Lester and Costley, 2010). This is fundamentally different to learning through educational institutions and can be highly structured to scaffold development (Billett, 2001). The nature of a workplace is a crucial component of the learning environment, whether this is 'expansive or restrictive' in the opportunities that it affords (Engeström, 2001) and practices that it encourages (Felstead *et al.*, 2005). The workplace learning environment will either support individuals' capacity to learn or otherwise. This article is centred on exploring new insights into social workers' experiences, to develop understanding of workplace learning for this profession.

## **Methodology and methods**

The study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, IPA (Smith *et al.*, 2009) to reveal the structure, texture and meaning of social workers' lived experiences. The methodology drove a commitment to

explore unique lived experiences and how social workers made sense of these. The study was undertaken in Scotland with social workers, working in a local authority setting who had worked across diverse settings and geographic areas in their career. Sample criteria were that participants should be qualified more than two years to differentiate from the newly qualified stage. Participants had been qualified for an average of fifteen years across a range of four to forty years in practice. Sixteen social workers were interviewed twice as part of data gathering and sense-making processes. Robust ethical foundations were central to the research design and process. Social workers are working in sensitive situations and discussed deeply personal experiences. Ethical approval was obtained from the researcher's university and the organisational site where the data was collected. Clear information was provided to participants about the parameters of the study, ongoing consent and the right to withdraw. Participants were invited to select a pseudonym of their choice at the point of interview. Care was taken throughout the study to manage attention to anonymity of individuals and services. As an inside-researcher there was also a clear focus on how any conflicts of interest would be managed.

Individual interviews were designed to collect data and elicit rich description from participants. The phenomenological component of IPA explores the nature of lived experience, so questions included prompts around the sensory experiences of social workers', in examples of their learning. After the first interview, a verbatim transcript was prepared and sent to the participant in advance of a follow-up interview. Within this interview one open question was used, 'What sense did the social worker make of their experience?' The double-hermeneutic cycle, a feature of IPA, firstly explored the meaning that the social workers drew from their experiences, followed by the researcher making sense of the participants' sensemaking. Individual experiences of the participants were explored, generating themes for the social workers through an immersive process of analysis for each case in turn. Representing the findings was a challenge and individual web diagrams were created that encapsulated social workers' themes to show their lived experiences. Superordinate themes were then identified across the group that showed the complexity of social workers' learning experiences more generally (Smith *et al.*, 2009).

## Findings

The study found that learning as a social worker in the workplace is an intricate web of physical and emotional experiences while navigating places, spaces and tasks. This web encapsulates seven superordinate themes from the study findings across the group of participants: journey of the self; navigating landscape and place; navigating tasks; learning through others; learning through the body; practices and conceptions of learning; and learning by chance (Ferguson, 2021, p.154). These themes help us understand the structure, texture and meaning of social workers' experiences of learning in the workplace. The threads between themes form a uniquely individual web deeply connected to social workers' embodied experiences of learning and the type of work opportunities that they undertake.

### Journey of the self

The social worker is a whole person immersed in learning as part of direct practice. Journey of the self involved different elements related to sense of self within the process. Social workers experienced their learning closely connected to their personal life, sense of readiness and motivation, the serious nature of work, sense of responsibility, and awareness of power and authority. Learning to use and manage self were also key. Social workers discussed the learning process as a sense of fit or otherwise, feeling human, and in contrast, alien, within their accounts of lived experience. Sense of fit related to where services were aligned with personal values, navigating ethical practice and dilemmas around fairness, social justice or meaningful work. Some social workers described the creation of new personas to navigate tasks and role using striking metaphors.

'I think in order to communicate as a social worker in this line of work you need to really kind of use Ziggy Stardust as a kind of analogy –when David Bowie created Ziggy Stardust it was about assuming someone else, you can never escape yourself but certainly you do assume different characters for different people that you work with. You've got judges and sheriffs. You've got a whole swathe of different professionals and people that you work with so that the way that I talk to the children's hearing and then present a case is different than when I do an unannounced visit to a family. All that screwing

on a different head in the sense of recreating yourself. I think there is a similarity in various areas that you go into in social work, you need to be able to wear different hats for different audiences – and Ziggy only lasted 19 months.’ Boab (Ferguson, 2021, p.93)

Boab’s learning experience involved the creation of a different self to navigate the workplace and tasks. He has used the metaphor of a character who has an intense but short lifespan created by the English musician David Bowie. Learning in this context is presented as being within an alien landscape to be able to survive. In contrast, some social workers described integrating their personal and professional selves.

‘I suppose like a ball with two bits that intertwine, that merging of your person coming together as a social worker, maybe bringing the profession and person into one. Sometimes I think learning to be a social worker is learning to be you, but on a different level.’ Caroline (Ferguson, 2021, p.135)

These examples begin to show how unique social workers’ experiences are and how workplace learning involves many elements.

## **Navigating landscape and place**

The workplaces that formed essential elements of social workers’ learning experiences were diverse. These workplaces were often physically or psychologically isolated: ‘in the dark’; ‘on your own’; and ‘at night’. Examples include the court; the hospital ward; the sheriff’s house in the middle of the night; and the home visit. Working within the home visit featured in significant learning for social workers closely associated with sense of safety and the ‘extreme as normal’.

Social workers described different worlds that they encountered, sometimes a ‘culture shock’, sometimes a familiar space. Trying to navigate workplaces was associated with trying to work out what to do, as well as how to do it with ‘no route map’. Social workers used battle metaphors in accounts of learning: ‘standing ground’; ‘finding ground’; ‘holding ground’; ‘being on the side lines’; ‘like a minefield’; and ‘learning to pick battles’.

‘... just getting the middle-ground... being able to rein it in... knowing which battles are worth fighting and which aren’t and sometimes having to make



peace with the battles that you don't take on.' Chloe (Ferguson, 2021, p.106)

Sensory aspects of the workplace associated with learning were also explored which involved intense emotional and physical experiences, 'an assault on all the senses'. Social workers described textures, smells, sounds and sights that formed their experiences of learning. One social worker described 'life and death in the smell' of contrasting care environments and articulated career-long learning about trusting cues in practice.

'You have to think through your senses when working with people who don't verbally communicate and I think for me now, thinking about domestic violence, parental substance misuse, what children's lived experiences are, a lot of that comes through your senses. You can't pin it down to what you know, to what you see, it's what you feel, what you smell all these different things and they're just as, if not more, important than some of the bigger grandiose Danny (Ferguson, 2021, p.146)

Informal learning in these complex workplace settings also involves navigating the expectations of an ambiguous role or task.

## **Navigating tasks**

Ambiguity was an explicit element of social workers' learning experiences with examples of trying to work out not only what to do but what the actual task or role of the social worker was. Social workers described undertaking tasks that were indescribable and sometimes conflicting or contradictory. Different skills were needed for different settings which reinforced this. Social workers' experience involved learning to balance and manage ambiguity, tension and contradiction. Social workers stated that specific experience, or knowledge, did not necessarily help them in future cases given the nuances of practice.

'I used to say to people, it would be really good to be something like a joiner or a plumber that people look at and go 'that's a really good job you've done there' and they can see it. In social work it's never as clear cut as that is it?' Karl (Ferguson, 2021, p.143)

The metaphor and experience of navigating 'the machine' also characterised learning, a way to work within the systems and processes of social work within the workplace. This involved 'feeding the system'; 'managing the conveyer belt'; and 'learning how to be within the system'. One social worker described an elaborate dystopian metaphor.

'You always feel like you're pulled back all the time to a terminal. Our workflow system is designed that way as well. So, you do this, and you do that and what people tend to do is then they'll put the family over there. they'll concentrate on the system.' Makine (Ferguson, 2021, p.148)

Something appearing minimal in relation to work tasks could also be very significant for social workers' learning. This meant that social workers learned about the potential of practice in the workplace.

'The value of direct work is significant, so I suppose I learned that from doing social work in a different way, in a different country The context was alien it was like being on the moon but on the other hand the direct work with kids was really, really productive and really, really rewarding I saw amazing changes in quite a short period of time in how their lives were going.' Reuben (Ferguson, 2021, p.127)

Social workers learned through work tasks about the importance of understanding the unique lives of people, 'keeping children alive and safe', 'trying to reduce chaos', trying to be realistic and understanding risk. These tasks were described as extraordinary and extreme yet had been accommodated as part of the job. The notion of 'extreme as normal' was linked to learning about life and death. As well as literal life and death, social workers learned about the enormity of their decisions and the impact on families. Examples of extreme learning experiences were with young people doused in petrol; a father who had killed the family pet; the birth of a baby who had died in utero; and working with a boy whose father had murdered their mother.

Social workers described not only the challenging practice examples of 'not a normal job' but the idea that they would then 'get up and do it again'. The idea of 'making a case' was woven through complexity of task and role related to decision-making in practice. The dynamic nature of tasks was also highlighted.

‘You are talking to a family and things are going smoothly and on track. You’ll say something that will trigger a reaction and suddenly you’re dealing with a whole different ball game. A bit more clicking into the complexity of relationships.’ Karl (Ferguson, 2021, p.146)

Practice examples were described with the articulation of associated learning points, for example, about the nature of distress and risk; the patterns of coercive control within family dynamics; importance of choice and listening; and understanding the different cultural backgrounds of families. Social workers had learned through their daily work tasks in ways that they could not have done so through other means.

### **Learning through the body**

Learning through the body, included physical and emotional aspects of learning. Feeling under threat was a strong feature of work examples that had led to learning about the task and the reality of people’s lives. Feeling ‘taken aback’, ‘preparing to be annihilated’ in court, and a sense of ‘shock’ are some examples of this. Social workers described shock at the extent of poverty and neglect experienced by families, experiencing a ‘new world’, and ‘having assumptions shattered’. Other sensory experiences contributed to learning with detail of sight, smell, sound, touch and taste and the concept of survival was often embedded.

‘the adrenaline was pumping through me... you feel that you are doing the wrong thing walking away... you are grabbling about later at night trying to find a (child’s foster) placement ... and the family members are not very happy about that and there’s a lot of U.N (United Nations) peace negotiating role sometimes when you’re trying to salvage placements.’ Jade (Ferguson, 2021, p.139)

One social worker used the metaphor ‘sink or swim’, ‘treading water’, and ‘being frozen’ as part of learning tasks. Other social workers described being ‘unable to sleep’ and ethical and moral tension manifesting in physical anxiety.

Physical and psychological isolation was experienced through the body as part of navigating places and tasks. The sense of being on their own also applied when in the presence of others, ‘like a stranger’, ‘being out’,

‘feeling alone’, ‘in the dark’, ‘feeling blind’ and ‘feeling alien’. The body as a vehicle for learning in work encounters was highlighted.

‘You’re mindful that you’re just going in, in your own body, you might have a housing officer that’s going out with an alarm and CCTV [closed circuit television] or something on them, or a body suit or whatever, you’re very much exposed and almost raw going into these everyday situations, we’re not police and we don’t have loads of back up, we’ve got a mobile phone and our own feet to run out the door.’ Maple (Ferguson, 2021, p.122)

Interrelated, intense emotions were woven throughout experiences of learning. Social workers described feeling ‘overwhelmed’, ‘anxious’, ‘guilty’, ‘sad’, ‘humiliated’. Social workers also learned through their own emotional experiences and those of other people. Learning to manage emotions of self and others was considered an important element of learning. Difficult emotional experiences were foregrounded in social workers’ description. Learning through enjoyable emotions was less present in accounts of learning. Social workers articulated clear and specific learning outcomes of these emotional encounters such as ‘some children just need space and a place to play’. Learning with other people and through work with people using social work services is another central theme within the web of social workers’ learning in the workplace.

## **Learning through others**

Firstly, the direct work with people who were receiving social work services was crucial to what and how social workers learned. The reality of life for people was striking, including learning about family dynamics and the impact of neglect and abuse across the lifespan. Learning about the impact of decisions, realising the seriousness of their professional role and task was common. Really getting to know children and adults was also highlighted as a key part of learning through the social work task. The expectations of other people in relation to practice, ‘demonisation of parents’, lack of empathy within media and interprofessional practice contexts was also part of social workers’ learning experiences.

Secondly, the influence of other social workers was a vital component of effective workplace learning. Other social workers, including their motivation was a key influencing feature. Several social workers also

highlighted the role of ‘the maverick’ or ‘dissenter’ as central to their learning in the workplace across their career. In many ways social workers regarded as maverick in the research were seen to be resisting ‘the machine’.

‘I worked with an older social worker for a time, I learned an awful lot from him that I carry even now. He was a wee bit non-conventional I think as a social worker, not as process led as some other folk. I’ve had really good experiences as well of learning to be the kind of social worker that I wanted to be.’ Sylvia (Ferguson, 2021, p.158)

Other professionals featured less in social workers’ accounts of learning. Where they did so this was in relation to reinforcing a sense of felt responsibility for example, in relation to managing risk. Opportunities to learn through other people is strongly related to the kinds of work that social workers have been allocated and where they have been working. Many aspects of this are random as demonstrated by the important theme Learning by chance.

### **Learning by chance**

Learning by chance was an important finding, part of the intricate and complex web of workplace learning. Social workers described their most significant learning experiences as being completely by chance. Chance included factors such as where social workers work, the paths that have led them there, the work allocated, the nature of each case and some entirely random variables. The paths that led social workers to specific workplaces included early work experiences and the significance of their qualifying practice placements. Social workers described their learning as ‘it almost kind of depends on where you end up’, ‘who you surround yourself with’ and ‘the kind of conversation you are willing to get into’.

‘It’s such a lottery isn’t it because I could have had 3 different (training) placements and I’ve no doubt there would have been some learning from them but you kind of land on that, completely by chance.’ Stephen (Ferguson, 2021, p.119)

The position and priority of direct casework in particular teams and allocation of cases had influenced opportunities for learning. This was

described by social workers as being down to chance. The role of the manager, other social workers and people using social work services were also inextricably linked to chance aspects of learning. Even when social workers have undertaken a complex piece of work- they describe that this does not necessarily prepare them for a similar case. One social worker described that if she had not been a smoker, she would not have learned crucial guidance for working on a case.

‘In the smoking shelter I learned an awful lot. I think you just learn on the hoof and from other people. I would get a lot of my advice from X and Y who were having a fag at the same time and I was saying I don’t know what to do with this one and they would say, have you tried this, have you looked at it this way... this shows that a lot of my learning has come from other people which has a lot to do with chance, what teams you were put in.’ Sylvia (Ferguson, 2021, p.122)

Social workers described being ‘lucky’ or ‘unlucky’ in the opportunities and enablers to their learning.

‘I felt like the worst social worker in the world because I was cross-examined in court...at the time I felt like I was me and my practice, but I was unlucky in being the worker to that case at that stage.’ Carol (Ferguson, 2021, p.97)

Individual motivation also influenced learning where social workers created opportunities according to their interests, resulting in experiences that they may not have been exposed to otherwise. These characteristics form part of what is unique in social workers’ experiences of learning in the workplace.

## **Practices and conceptions of learning**

Individual interests and motivation were related to social workers’ learning in the workplace with ‘professional curiosity’ and ‘having a thirst for knowledge’ examples of this. Reflective practices such as ‘finding time’; ‘taking time’; and ‘stepping back’ were closely linked to making sense of work experiences, managing emotions and the complexity of work tasks.

‘It is that subconscious bit that you’re always developing ways to do things in

practice anyway and that then shapes what underpins your practice moving forward. I think you learn a lot when cases maybe don't go so well either, it is the subconscious professional development that you do when you are working a case. Sophie (Ferguson, 2021, p.155)

Social workers learned by watching, demonstration or discussion associated with their tasks. Learning through surprising encounters and mistakes were also associated with key learning moments. A continual cycle of learning was embedded in social workers' experiences, for example 'learning on a daily basis'; and 'learning never ends'.

'I don't think I've ever stopped learning. If you've come into contact with people, different ideas, different experiences you learn from that in equal measures.' Karl (Ferguson, 2021, p.142)

The themes within the web combine to represent learning in the workplace for social workers. Workplace learning has multiple layers and threads and is experienced by social workers as deeply connected to their personal selves, bodies and emotions.

## **Discussion**

A transtheoretical approach to understand the complexity of workplace learning and the dynamic processes involved is offered by Illeris (2011). These dynamic processes include work identity and organisational practices at the intersection of multiple individual and workplace influences. Illeris proposes an individual dimension that includes content of learning, outcomes and learner volition that interacts with the organisational dimension. The organisational dimension includes the technical-rational and social-cultural environments of the workplace, the nature of work, allocation, distribution and division of labour (Illeris, 2011). Opportunities for working autonomously and interaction between influences that can trigger learning are important. Understanding the position of the social worker alongside the nature of the workplace and work tasks are central to considering what learning involves for this professional group.

The research findings reveal the nature and complexity of how social workers learn in the workplace. Some study findings resonate with other

research areas such as issues of professional identity formation (for example, Webb, 2016; Wiles and Vicary, 2019) however this is only one part of the journey of the self. Billet (2001) proposes that in workplace learning the curriculum is individual, and the trajectory of the professional learner comprises their biographical and biological development. Journey of the self involved the trajectory of the individual in developing as a social worker, but also the parallel process of personal lives.

The nature of the workplace is also an important aspect of the findings. The study highlighted the diverse places and spaces in which social work happens. In these places the social worker encounters others through their own physical and emotional experience. The home visit has been acknowledged as a complex arena in which social workers negotiate the physical boundaries and expectations of their role (Ferguson, 2009). This was echoed in the study findings with social workers citing diverse and sometimes dangerous workplace sites of their learning. The landscape and workplace of social work is also characterised by non-physical things which include the legislative and policy context, organisational culture and the position of the social worker in this. It is poignant to consider where the social workers are physically located in any organisation. The physical landscape of the workplace changes for example, a shift to integrated, agile and remote working practices. This is an important aspect of whether learning experiences are available to social workers (Grant *et al.*, 2022). The suggestion that social workers are crucial to one another's learning does not dismiss the potential of interprofessional learning and practice. The landscape does however influence where social workers are to be found by each other in organisations. Hood (2015) identified development in the professional network of social workers essential to support individual learning. It is perhaps even more important that there is an opportunity to strengthen learning opportunities between social work colleagues given the shifting environment.

Workplace tasks were found to be complex and ambiguous resonating with Hood's perspective where the unpredictability of both task and eventual outcome characterise social workers' experiences (Hood, 2015). Patterns of work allocation that scaffold learning are subject to the diversity of social work organisations. Billet writes extensively on the affordances or activities that will generate or enable learning in the workplace such as patterns of work task allocation (Billet, 2004). Billett suggests that the workplace curriculum does not have a robust associated pedagogy in



organisations, resulting in learning opportunities that are not optimised (Billett, 2004). This connects with the study findings of learning by chance. The ambiguity that social workers face stresses the importance of articulating the detail of what is meant by practice and learning. The web promotes understanding of the interplay between the different learning components that are threaded together in social workers' experience. For other professions, the distinct and detailed nuances of workplaces and work tasks would be different albeit none the less complex for some. What is unique to social work is reflected in the research findings.

The research methods were designed to elicit accounts rich in physical and sensory details of learning. Corporeality is identified as a core part of phenomenology by van Manen (2014) as how experience is lived through the body. Social work is not often associated with physical labour, yet the importance of the body is clear as part of lived experience of learning in the context of work. In contrast, social work is associated with the emotional context of practice, e.g., Ingram (2013) however not necessarily framed in terms of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). The findings showed that social workers learned in relation to difficult emotional experiences which may be that these were memorable, however the way in which emotion triggers learning in the workplace is of interest for further study. Ferguson (2018) found evidence that negative emotions influence social workers' ability to reflect on their practice experiences. Maclean, Finch and Tedam (2018) offer a new theoretical model for social work, hooking into sensory experience and proposing the importance of the senses connected to deep critical reflection. There is an emergence of rhetoric around resilience and wellbeing for social work professionals, this acknowledges to an extent the emotional rigour and potential impact of work on individuals. There is also an emerging research interest in mindfulness practices that encourage social workers to notice and attend to what is happening in the body (Kellock, 2018).

Physical and emotional aspects of learning are often absent in workforce development responses to professional development. The research highlights the centrality of learning through the body. The findings suggest that developments in alternatives to direct practice learning, such as virtual or simulated practice skills development, need to consider how issues like the intensity of emotional and physical aspects of learning are integrated in the design. Replicating authentic practice learning for social work education and CPL must not ignore the emotional and physical components.

Social workers learn through their work with people irrespective of the service they work in. Recognising the significance of what social workers learn from people using social work services cannot be underestimated. Learning with other social workers is also central to effective workplace learning strategies. Where social workers are and the opportunities to be in contact with other social workers matters. This might relate to the physical location or resource within teams, but also the opportunity for social workers to learn in single professional spaces not only multi-disciplinary activities.

Informal and incidental learning theory is widely applied to workplace learning (Marsick and Watkins, 2001; Colley *et al.*, 2003), however the significance of completely accidental learning in the research findings is stressed. Learning has occurred by sheer fluke for social workers, the opportunity and outcome of the learning neither explicit nor visible within the workplace. There is no consistent design of allocation of work tasks to social workers to generate learning beyond basic induction in most workplaces (Grant *et al.*, 2022). How to plan effective workplace learning strategies that account for the significance of learning by chance is a challenge to consider.

While the research did not intend to focus on pre-qualifying learning, social workers set their experience in chronological context. Current arrangements for planning and allocating practice learning placements in Scotland are subject to many variables and experiences are not consistent for students (Daniel *et al.*, 2016). The placement setting has perhaps influenced the employment choices that social workers made in relation to what types of work they had been exposed to and developed experience in. A recent study of nursing students career paths relating to their pre-qualifying placement experiences also suggests that this is influential (Wareing *et al.*, 2018).

Although formal learning opportunities such as training courses and accredited study were rarely mentioned in social workers' accounts, the research intended to focus on workplace learning. Grant *et al.* (2022) propose integrated solutions to CPL for social workers that balance formal, informal and accredited opportunities that are resourced on a par with other professions. Keeping learning as the focus in relation to regulatory requirements and frameworks needs a mindset shift across the profession that values- workplace learning.

The study identifies several implications for those who support social workers' learning:

- workplaces and direct practice tasks offer essential sources of professional learning for social workers;
- understanding what learning in the workplace involves for social workers is important for strategic planning of professional development and effective organisational practices that support this;
- emotional and physical aspects of learning must be acknowledged;
- opportunities for social workers to learn together informally and formally are necessary.

## Conclusion

Workplace learning for social workers is a complex, intricate web of sensory and emotional experiences while navigating places, spaces and tasks. The research has established that learning through others; navigating task; navigating landscape and place; and learning by chance involve learning triggered through workplace practices. The complexity of the social work workplace environment and tasks have also been identified. There is not a systematic pattern for social workers' learning in the workplace. The web model discussed in this article is important for understanding the nuances, relationships and characteristics that interact between individual and organisational influences.

The research offers a distinctive contribution to the knowledge about social workers' experience through a workplace learning lens. Workplace learning is an essential element of CPL for social workers as part of strategic, organisational and individual practices. Learning in the workplace can be incredibly potent for social workers, yet it is not a primary focus in planning for CPL. Indeed, some of social workers' most significant and valuable learning risks being left to chance.

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