

LEARNING PROFILES OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS: WHO ARE YOU AND HOW SHOULD THIS INFLUENCE MY TEACHING?..... 577

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This qualitative study explores the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) of social work students on notions of students' learning profile. Data were obtained from both student and staff participants on third year level within the social work programme during the teaching of a particular module focusing on family wellbeing. The implications of strong reactions during teaching and learning are juxtaposed against the notions of students' learning profile and participants' teaching and learning suggestions. Several recommendations are made that have emerged from the study that attempt to relate to students' learning profile in social work professional learning.

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## INTRODUCTION

Internationally, classrooms reflect an increasingly diverse world of differing ages, abilities, cultures, interests, motivations and difficulties (Rosslyn, 2004; Tomlinson, Brighton, Hertberg, Callahan, Moon, Brimijoin, Conover & Reynolds, 2003). The situation in South Africa is no different. The majority of South African students currently in higher education are first-generation (non-traditional) students commonly (and indiscriminately) described as underprepared, coming from impoverished backgrounds in terms of economic strength, poor schooling and socio-cultural resources, and using English as additional language (Bozalek, 2013; Carelse & Dykes, 2013; Collins & Van Breda, 2010; Hlalele, 2010; Smit, 2012).

In order to facilitate learning for these diverse groups, it is vital to know who the adult learner is in terms of the role of personal circumstances in the learning endeavour, as well as to ascertain how adults learn (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007; Ramsden, 1992). The current student profile at the university where the study was undertaken started to emerge during the 1980s, when the institution initiated an affirmative action admissions policy designed to broaden access particularly for students from all historically disadvantaged communities (Bozalek, 2013). For the non-traditional and adult learner, the concepts of self and self-directed learning are vital (Hyland-Russell & Groen, 2011) in that they feed into their individual learning approaches; this in turn advances the philosophy of learner-centredness (Wilcox, 1996).

Learning styles have been variously defined in the literature. For this study the overall notion of learning profile will be used to refer to students' personal traits (such as biological, cultural and societal factors; emotional and social influences; academic record and learning preferences) that optimise the individual's learning (Powell & Kusuma-Powell, 2011; Rollnick, Lubben, Lotz & Dlamini, 2002). A learning profile consists of two dimensions (Fry, Ketteridge & Marshall, 2009; Vanthournout, Coertjens, Gijbels, Donche & Van Petegem, 2013), namely, *learning styles* (stable personal characteristics of the learner), and *learning approaches* (changeable competencies related to task and context). Lecturers have to address these variances within their classrooms where "equality of opportunity" is fulfilled when the varied needs of the learners are met (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2003). Studies confirm that there is a link between self-efficacy and personal beliefs (learning styles) and the student's approach to learning of specific activities (learning approaches) (Kell, 2006).

Very few studies have been undertaken to explore or examine the link between the adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) of some social work students, their learning profiles and appropriate teaching and learning methods. Studies on the learning profiles in social work have mostly focused on the implications for fieldwork education

(Cartney, 2004, 2000). Previous studies have explicated the ACEs of some social work students at a particular university as being the following: (i) Childhood abuse epitomised by emotional, physical and sexual abuses; (ii) Troubled family life through ineffectual caregiving, parental absences, unmet needs, being left behind, substance abuse, inadequate financial/material support, and intimate partner violence. The learning profiles of these students that emerged as a result of the impact of ACEs manifested during social work teaching and learning (Dykes, 2014, 2012, 2011). Their responses were typified by their narratives of distress, tearfulness, negative and struggling emotions, rationalising, and especially a fear of their own bias and partiality regarding particular issues that closely mimic their own (Dykes, 2014).

To date, many quantitative studies have been done to examine the learning profiles of social work students mainly using Kolb's learning styles (Cartney, 2000; Chesborough, 2009; Massey, Kim & Mitchell, 2011; Williams, Brown & Etherington, 2013), which focused strongly on learning approaches. Students' overly emotional reactions within the teaching and learning environment imply that learning profile inventories that focus mainly on assessing cognition and learning approaches would not account for the impact of students' ACEs on their learning. However, there are two instruments for quantitative research that do take these aspects into consideration, namely, the Dunn and Dunn Learning Style Model, which includes emotional and psychological processing, and the Revised Approaches to Studying Inventory (RASI) which also includes affective factors in its measurement (Hawk & Shah, 2007).

Studies that gleaned teaching and learning strategies on the basis of students' self-reported ACEs and their link to students' learning profiles are scant. Consequently there is a lack in the literature of qualitative studies exploring appropriate teaching and learning strategies based on social work students' ACEs and their particular learning profiles.

The aim of this study is to explore and describe key social work teaching and learning strategies from research participants, based on the impact of adverse childhood experiences and consequent learning profiles. Therefore the research question is: *What are key teaching and learning strategies from student and staff participants, based on the impact of adverse childhood experiences on learning profiles of social work students?*

## **TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING THEORY AS THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

From the myriad teaching and learning theories and approaches that exist, transformative learning theory (TLT) gained relevance because of its focus on the personal realities of the student and the possibility of transformative outcomes for the learning process.

Transformative learning theory is most often associated with Jack Mezirow (Professor Emeritus of Adult Education, Columbia University). Higher education (HE) classrooms are appropriate spaces for students to engage in activities to reflect on the roots of their

beliefs and opinions (Riggs & Hellyer-Riggs, 2009; Taylor, 2008) and TLT creates the learning spaces to undertake such reflections (Taylor, 2008). Therefore learning in TLT is based on using our previous knowledge (and experiences) to support new and/or amended learning to guide our subsequent actions or behaviour, thus contributing to a paradigm shift (Taylor, 2008).

Mezirow (1997:5) confirmed that transformative learning “is the process of effecting change in a frame of reference”. Frames of reference describe our reality, reflecting the essence of our experiences, for example, our thoughts and feelings as well as our usual responses and reactions (Imel, 1998; Taylor, 2008). Mezirow (1997:5) asserts that frames of reference “are the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences” and experiences consist of mental (cognitive), action (driven by impulse, desire or resolve) and affective (emotion) parts. Frames of reference are mainly constituted from our social and cultural interactions driven by our primary caregivers.

Transformative learning is achieved when we critically reflect on suppositions or conjectures that underlie our frames of reference. However, learning is only achieved when what we have to learn relates to our frame of reference. In linking frames of reference when designing teaching and learning methods, six elements that lecturers should reflect on are recommended (Imel, 1998; Mezirow, 1997; Riggs & Hellyer-Riggs, 2009; Taylor, 2011, 2008).

### ***The elements of TLT***

- The centrality of experience: Experience is gained through social interaction with other peers or in practice (work) learning environments.
- Critical reflection: Interrogating the authenticity of their suppositions that originate from previous experiences.
- Rational discourse: This is used when we have need to query the understanding, veracity or relevance (relating to norms) or genuineness (relating to feelings) underlying the conversation or discussion.
- Holistic orientation: The inclusion of different ways of learning, for example, the relevance of the rational and the emotional, as well as the interpersonal.
- Awareness of context: The consideration of traditional, cultural practices together with personal beliefs that play a strong role in the learning process.
- Authentic relationships: Creating real relationships with other students where students acquire confidence in engaging with learning on an emotional level, which can often be perceived as challenging.

These six elements have implications for the roles of educator and student.

### ***The lecturer's role***

- Structured learning: Have all necessary information ready for learning, from beginning to end, from small bits on which to base larger bits.

- Learning profiles: Not exerting undue pressure on students to learn and to scaffold learning in accordance with students' learning needs.
- Participatory learning: Provide equal and frequent opportunities for students to participate and offer their opinions and viewpoints.

### ***The student's role***

- Learning to use the imagination: To be able to delineate problems from diverse viewpoints; to be critically reflective, as well as to be able to fathom the best possible solution in a given situation.
- Participating in discourse: Discourse with others is essential to substantiate the core of one's perceptions and decision making.

The transformative qualities of learning in TLT are shown through the roles of the educator and student juxtaposed with the elements of TLT. Proposed classroom teaching methods include learning contracts, group projects, role play, case studies and simulations, while learning activities include critical incidents, metaphor analysis, concept mapping, consciousness raising, life histories, repertory grids and participation in social action. The over-reliance on critical reflection (and therefore too logically focused) can be tempered with emotions and intuition which can be facilitated through discernment (Imel, 1998). Of note for this study, Mezirow (2011:26-27) affirms "that Transformative Learning often occurs as the result of an adult gaining insight into unresolved traumatic experiences occurring in childhood". Therefore, the essential elements of TLT tie in well with the focus of the study on ACEs and learning profiles of social work students. It is evident that to achieve personal transformation outcomes for students, both teaching and learning have to create opportunities for these specific outcomes.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The qualitative case study design (Creswell, 2013) was used to explore how third-year social work students at a specific university experienced ACEs in relation to teaching and learning and the students' learning profile. The research population consisted of 86 third-year students in the module. Data were sourced from student and staff participants. Students were asked whether they would volunteer their reflexive assignments in a specific third-year social work module. Data were collected from 20 reflexive assignments, selected from an initial volunteer sample of 30 students. The purposive sampling method (Creswell, 2013) was used to select a further sample of 10 student participants (from the above sample of reflexive assignments) for individual interviews. Two staff participants who taught the sample of students within the same time frame (excluding the researcher) were also interviewed.

The purpose of the writing of formative, reflexive assignments and individual interviews was to connect students with the role and influence of their own childhood experiences in their professional learning context. Students were asked to do personal introspection by reflecting on seven questions focusing on the role of their own childhood and family experiences in their social work learning. The aim with staff interviews was to obtain their perspectives on their teaching activities and experiences with students who might

have endured challenging circumstances, and the possible impact within the class context.

Thematic analysis was used to gain understanding of the patterns, forms and configurations of the data sets. The data were analysed in accordance with the steps in within-case analysis (Babbie, 2014; Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Creswell, 2013; De Vos, 2011) and used thematic analyses of: (i) each reflexive assignment, individual student interview and staff interview; (ii) each data set (20 reflexive assignments, ten individual student interviews and two staff interviews); and (iii) comparisons of data sets for data synthesis, comparing and contrasting. Four validity strategies were undertaken to enhance the trustworthiness of the study, namely member checking, rich descriptions, triangulation and researcher self-reflexivity especially with regard to bias and power differentials (Creswell, 2013). Consent and ethical clearance for the study were obtained from two institutions before the study was undertaken.

## **KEY FINDINGS: PARTICIPANTS' SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE CONTEXT OF ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES**

The data that emerged from student and staff interviews supplied three key suggestions by these two distinct sets of role players in relation to teaching and learning strategies as well as methods regarding the role and effect of ACEs (Table 1).

### **KEY SUGGESTIONS BY PARTICIPANTS**

**TABLE 1**  
**KEY SUGGESTIONS (MAIN THEMES AND SUB-THEMES) BY PARTICIPANTS FOR SOCIAL WORK TEACHING AND LEARNING**

<b>1. Teaching and learning activities</b>	<b>2. Lecturer immediacy behaviours</b>	<b>3. Fieldwork and placement learning</b>	<b>SUB-THEMES</b>
Extend participatory learning methods and activities	Encourage student self-disclosure	Ensure efficient fieldwork coordination and supervision	
Expand use of real-world issues that students face	Respond to students' emotional reactions	Incorporate fieldwork educational approaches	
	Create debriefing opportunities	Teach students self-assessment of strengths	
		Focus on mindfulness	

The table shows the three main suggestions derived from the data (main themes) and the nine different components of the main suggestions (sub-themes). Each key suggestion (main theme) is explored separately in the following sections.

#### **Teaching and learning activities**

The suggestions about teaching and learning methods in class that are pertinent to the experiences of student and staff participants are explicated in two sub-themes.

### **Extend participatory learning methods and activities**

Participants identified participatory methods such as reflective assignments, case study use and movies as conducive to learning and suggested that lecturers should include more of these in teaching and learning.

- *“I think that there should be like more exercises on more stuff like the reflective summary where you can be in touch with your feelings and you can share your experience.”* [Student participant]
- *“I think the lecturer should just continue those case studies where people can unpack and discuss in small groups because in that way yes you’ll be in pain or you’ll be uneasy but at least you will be in the company of your friends and your class mates.”* [Student participant]

These narratives show participants’ views on what they relished as learning activities. Participatory methods can provide a springboard for experiential learning activities (Bozalek & Biersteker, 2010; Lee & Fortune, 2013; Norton, Russell, Wisner & Uriarte, 2011; Wehbi & Strake, 2011). Examples of transformative and experiential learning methods are reflection and reflexive exercises (Mezirow, 1997; Wehbi, 2011). These exercises have been extolled as being central to social work education for promoting deep (and new) learning and critical thinking skills (Hinett, 2001; Hussain, Mehmood & Sultana, 2011; Ringel, 2003). The benefit of reflection is that it can be the means of integrating and making sense of cognitive (rational and factual) and metacognitive (self-awareness, personal assumptions and insight) experiences (Baum, 2012; Hinett, 2001; Pallisera, Fullana, Pandarias & Badosa, 2013) and socio-political learning constraints (Chapman & Clegg, 2007). Pertinent to the research findings of this study, reflexive exercises enhanced insight into the emotions of learning to facilitate awareness of students’ own feelings, actions and values. These exercises develop their professional responses and reactions (Furman, Coyne & Negi, 2008; Hussain *et al.*, 2011). In participatory methods the use of case studies and movies, and written exercises are often cited as means to facilitate deep and reflective learning (Gibbons & Gray, 2004; Hussain *et al.*, 2011; Pallisera *et al.*, 2013). The value of this suggestion is that participatory and reflective methods should not be an inconsistent application at the will of individual lecturers, but should be structured as part of the teaching philosophy of the social work programme, with appropriate debriefing embedded.

### **Expand use of real-world issues that students face**

Participants expressed the need for lecturers to use real-world issues (authentic learning) to better prepare them for practice. A real-world context refers to concrete or realistic learning experiences in contrast to the often intellectual, academic or model-type context of the classroom (Random House Kernerman Webster’s College Dictionary, 2010).

- *“I can say to my lecturers, yes it is good work that they are doing but I think they should elaborate more on these issues, elaborate more that these things these are things that are real, these are the things that we face and that you should expect in the future.”* [Student participant]

- “...*bringing in more issues at the same time will also trigger those personal experiences, maybe like the issues of rape it is quite a traumatic situation.*” [Student participant]

Here the narratives showed participants’ desire to learn through issues that they could strongly relate to (and identify with) in theory and in practice. The narratives also show that there was a need to bring students’ own personal (and family) issues into the broader discussions so that they could relate to and learn from them. These suggestions present an opportunity for classroom learning to be structured around a different orientation to the learning that already takes place in classrooms on similar issues. The difference here is that students want their own experiences to also be included. Their suggestions have trust and ethical implications as to the way in which these needs could be facilitated within classroom learning. The participants expressed the need for their learning to be real-world based (in terms of the students’ real world); this seems common sense but should be structured in a way that learning and students’ privacy are not compromised for those who do want to disclose personal experiences.

Theme 1 contained suggestions that are relevant to learning as participatory methods can be the conduit for *reflective* (reflecting on direct experiences) and *reflexive* (reflecting on personal experiences) learning. Reflective/reflexive learning facilitates critical thinking and deep learning. Significantly in terms of this study, reflexive tasks enable students to gain insight (self-awareness) into the emotions of learning. Using real-world issues presupposes that students would be better prepared for practice and that the learning context be based on realistic learning tasks positioning students’ personal experiences within their general learning.

### **Lecturers’ immediacy behaviours**

The second suggestion clarified participants’ views about lecturers’ personal and professional behaviours within the classroom (called immediacy behaviours). A positive lecturer-student relationship is conducive to learning and predicated on *proximity* (the level of cooperation and closeness) and *influence* (the balance between dominance and compliance) (Brekelsman, Den Brok, Van Tartwijk & Wubbels, 2005; Myers & Anderson, 2010). Janis Anderson (in 1979) identified these actions as immediacy behaviours and key components in classroom communicative behaviours that foster student engagement and the social presence of the lecturer (Burroughs, 2007; Gendrin & Rucker, 2007; Reupert, Mayberry, Patrick & Chittleborough, 2009; Sibii, 2010). This suggestion revealed three sub-themes that focused on self-disclosure, lecturer reactions and debriefing imperatives.

### **Encourage student self-disclosure (sharing/talking)**

Participants suggested that lecturers encourage sharing and talking about students’ personal experiences.

- “*Well I would actually say is you could encourage people to talk more in class, to share their stories.*” [Student participant]

- *“I also suggest that maybe instead of doing case studies or like in terms of activities, they would just ask maybe because there are students in class that also went through similar situations.”* [Student participant]

The narratives unmistakably illustrated the need of participants to share their life experiences and to listen to those of fellow students within the classroom context. Good teaching should not only facilitate academic success, but also life success by being aware of the interrelatedness of socio-emotional skills and academic outcomes (Grauerholz, 2001; Zins & Elias, 2007). Meyer and Turner (2002) confirm that emotions are entangled in the responses of both students and lecturers, and therefore are central in the relational aspects in the classroom. By teaching holistically, lecturers can link academic teaching to students’ personal experiences and, in this way, deep learning takes place (Grauerholz, 2001). Although there are boundaries to student self-disclosure (student protection, stigma and discrimination), the notion of self-disclosure is a shared and necessary activity that would consequently influence class interactions (Rosenbloom & Fetner, 2001).

Furthermore, the lecturer’s role is to manage the process of student self-disclosure in relevant ways and take into account its possible implications and impact on the students themselves (Tardy & Dindia, 2006; Ward, 2008). Self-disclosure is determined by certain principles, such as the amount to disclose, level of information to share, timing of disclosure and types of information (Jeffrey & Austin, 2007). This finding shows that self-disclosure is necessary, but that it should be structured and purposeful in terms of teaching and learning and professional outcomes.

### **Respond to students’ emotional reactions**

Recommendations were obtained about the responses that student participants expected to their emotional reactions.

- *“And even if you know that you’re going to encourage them, you know you must have a back-up plan if someone gets emotional, what am I going to do.”* [Student participant]
- *“If you’re walking around you can actually see and ask them okay maybe you should stay behind, I noticed during the lecture while I was walking around and while you were engaging with other group members that you were actually maybe uncomfortable with the topic. Maybe if you do that you could give the person some recommendations to speak to people.”* [Student participant]

Participants show through these narratives that they want lecturers to engage with them on a more intimate level and to be able to see them as real people with personal histories and not only as learning vessels. Historically, universities have been the site for intellectual and logical reasoning, underscoring the pre-eminence of the Cartesian dualities of, for example, cognitive vs affective, mind vs body, and the gender split, rendering the context for higher learning devoid of feelings and passion (Blomberg, 2013; Leathwood & Hey, 2009; Varlander, 2008). Therefore the place of emotion in learning in higher education has been strongly impugned (Leathwood & Hey, 2009).

However, studies have confirmed the significance of emotion in learning and the necessity for HEIs to recognise its influence and role within the learning context (Cartney & Rouse, 2006; Kasworm, 2008; Storrs, 2012) and for lecturers to respond fittingly to students' emotions (Storrs, 2012; Varlander, 2008).

Participants proposed that suitable lecturing skills included, for example, being sensitive to students' viewpoints; preparing students beforehand regarding the emotional content/possible impact of topics; being empathic and observant; providing personal examples; and allowing voluntary student participation. Some strategies that lecturers could use in the classroom in emotionally charged situations are: cultivating a supportive culture in the class, for example, respect for other's histories and feelings; adhering to the principles of confidentiality and boundaries; recognising the distress of others; initiating dialogues as co-constructions of meaning; facilitating reflection; taking the student's perspective; and active listening (Agllias, 2012; McLaughlin, 2000; Storrs, 2012). Varlander (2008) used Crotty's (1998) definition of constructivism to link the role of emotions in learning to the constructivist notion of learning where knowledge building is socially constructed out of the interactions between people and their environment.

The cited literature has presented very meaningful ways in which the personal narratives of students can be elicited, providing a structure for confidentiality, respect and trust. The suggestion clearly indicates that structured responses to students' emotions in learning will form part of future teaching and learning in HEIs.

### **Create debriefing opportunities**

Recommendations included suggestions for debriefing opportunities for emotionally-laden discussions and reflective tasks. Debriefing will provide space for students to reflect on their knowledge and practice in order to consider and integrate their perceptions, feelings and behaviour during the learning exercise (Dreifuerst, 2009; Rudolph, Simon, Raemer & Eppich, 2008).

- *“I felt that we should have had a space where we could have discussed it (the movie) afterwards.”* [Student participant]
- *“Even if it was just some friends making groups and going to discuss the movie and then writing up some of the things that came up.”* [Student participant]

Participants' suggestions reveal that they want lecturers to embed suitable outlets after emotive learning sessions within module outlines. Koster (2011) argues that student self-disclosures alter the lecturer-student relationship boundaries because the need to help students overrides the purely academic role. Cantrell (2008) confirms that course content and (simulation) exercises can ignite a powerful need for debriefing and thus social work students (in particular) should be prepared for the nature of the learning and possible emotional reactions (Didham, Dromgole, Csiernik, Karley & Hurley, 2011). Debriefing should be a vital component of the curriculum and should take place after the exercise to assist with disengagement and to assimilate the academic and emotional experiences into learning (Didham *et al.*, 2011; Garrett, MacPhee & Jackson, 2010; Reese, Jeffries &

Engum, 2010; Sieminski & Seden, 2011). Debriefing, including critical reflection, should therefore be included in academic planning (Garrett *et al.*, 2010) because it is vital for experiential learning (Fanning & Gaba, 2007; Rudolph, Simon, Rivard, Dufresne & Raemer, 2007). Debriefing can be free-form, for example, through email and telephone conversations with the lecturer, but it will depend on the lecturer-student ratio in the class (Agllias, 2012). Debriefing can also be open in the classroom, where the lecturer may ask students to explore their own socio-emotional histories that could lead to countertransference issues or vicarious traumatisation (Didham *et al.*, 2011). The findings again denote that participants are clear about their needs. Debriefing in the class (or after) is essential and the literature verifies this task; whether free-form or structured (or both), this must be part of the mind-set of the social work lecturer.

Theme 2 involves lecturers' immediacy behaviours, which prompted three suggestions. These suggestions encouraged student self-disclosure; exhorted lecturers to institute structured responses to students' emotional reactions in class; and recommended the creation of structured debriefing opportunities. The suggestions are relevant with regard to the ACEs of students and their resultant heightened emotions, and they clarify the role of lecturers in this context.

### **Fieldwork and placement learning**

Staff participants suggested that students be sufficiently oriented and prepared for theory and practice. Fieldwork learning is a purposeful plan for practice learning that takes place in professional work settings in order for students to integrate theory and practice under the tutelage (supervision) of a qualified social worker (Bogo, 2006; Dhemba, 2012). Fieldwork learning is often cited as social work's signature pedagogy (Wayne, Bogo & Raskin, 2010). Social work fieldwork emerged from the apprenticeship model of learning by doing and through role modelling by the practitioner (Cleak & Smith, 2012). The aim of social work fieldwork supervision is to facilitate opportunities for theory and practice integration and the development of a professional persona (Cleak & Smith, 2012; Everett, Miehl, Dubois & Garran, 2011). There are four sub-themes.

### **Incorporate fieldwork education approaches**

Suggestions for the inclusion of teaching and learning approaches for the practicum programme, namely the student-centred philosophy and the human capabilities approach, were particularly geared to the learning needs of students.

- *“I think it is more student-centred .... we should really hone in on that approach to supervision and to our curriculum. I know it's aimed at clients... But I think we could draw on the theoretical philosophy of it more for our students as well.”*  
[Staff participant]
- *“...we should look at human capabilities approach when we re-curriculate [denoting curriculum redesign] because of the uniqueness of the [university's] BSW in that we have a particular number of our student cohort that should be RPL [Recognition of Prior Learning], that comes with experience and also our young newly matriculated students, they come with a variety of different”*

*backgrounds and experience... And then hand in hand with that would go strength-based...* [Staff participant]

These suggestions mention appropriate theories that would relate to students' learning profiles. The capabilities approach is based on welfare economics originally developed by Amartya Sen and further developed by the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (Maddox, 2008; Nussbaum, 2006; Robeyns, 2003; Walker, 2012; Wood & Deprez, 2012). A key principle is the focus on what people are able to do and to become, emphasising the values of autonomy and freedom (Robeyns, 2003), which can counteract an adverse past, present circumstances, and feed into educational needs (Wood & Deprez, 2012). The constructivist approach to teaching and learning is not dissimilar to the capabilities approach in that the principles of student-centred learning and active learning are particularly geared towards developing the students' capacities through flexible, self-directed, collaborative, problem-based and experiential learning (Mascolo, 2009; O'Neill & McMahon, 2005). The suggestion that the fieldwork programme be underpinned with a specific learning approach is positive and the suggestions are worth considering as they link with a particular student profile.

### **Teach students self-assessment of strengths**

To inform the learning contract, students should be assisted from the first year to assess their own strengths and to scaffold and reflect on them on a regular basis, instead of supervisors fulfilling this task.

- *“In the first year already maybe in every year level that the students write for us that will go onto their personal file, what are my strengths and it comes from them... [and not] from the perspective of the supervisor.”* [Staff participant]
- *“I think I would definitely next year want to focus more in having them believe and accept that when they go into an agency that they're coming to add some value. Because some of them do feel that what am I doing here? What can I really do? I've been abused can I really do this? I have such a failed self-esteem, can I really do this?”* [Staff participant]

These suggestions focused on the skill of self-assessment by students which would advance their notions of self-efficacy and self-belief. Research has confirmed that self-assessment (where it operates as a mechanism for learning) can be a means for enabling students to accurately identify their strengths and weaknesses (Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009; Eva & Regehr, 2005). Benefits for students are professional self-regulation, appropriate goal setting, confidence boosting and increased motivation (Andrade & Du, 2007; Langendyk, 2006; Ross, 2006). For the most part students generally linked self-assessment to their perception of the time and effort invested in the task, not necessarily related to the standard of work (Taras, 2003). However, accurate self-assessment was linked to a deep approach to learning (Cassidy, 2006). This suggestion is sporadically used in social work at the specific university, but in a somewhat inconsistent and unstructured way. The cited literature has expanded the thinking around student self-assessment that, when used in the suggested way, will assist in achieving deep learning,

but not in its current form. Therefore to develop deep learning, self-assessment must be embedded in modules across year levels for scaffolding of this skill.

### **Focus on mindfulness in learning**

To focus on the self in the first year of study, with topics on self-development allowing students to reflect on who they are and “what they’re about”, will form the basis for their professional self and identity. These learning endeavours have been identified as mindfulness. Mindfulness in the classroom is a cognitive activity for raising students’ awareness of their internal and external lenses that would enable them to pay unencumbered attention to their emotions and to the various viewpoints in the class as the learning process unfolds (Coholic, 2011; Napoli & Bonifas, 2011; Napoli, Krech & Holley, 2005).

- *“I think there should be something more maybe built into 101 [first-year fieldwork module] on self-development, personal development, just for that student from first year to know who they are, what they’re about, more intense work with that so that they can determine whether this is for me, there already you know instead of coming to third year and working with all these different types of issues and then dropping out to say that because it’s too hectic.”* [Staff participant]
- *“I say it must start from their first year so that they can develop into this practitioner when they come to third and fourth year. So I think it’s definitely a matter of having to – I don’t want to say overcome – but having to accept their past and what has happened and having tools to manage that past and I think that would be a good investment.”* [Staff participant]

These suggestions clearly reflect the significance of students’ early exposure to learning tasks that would provide opportunities for them to learn more about themselves. This focus will assist students in developing intra-personal awareness and strengths to manage their past, as well as assess whether social work is the appropriate career for them. The outcomes of mindfulness include self-acceptance, trust, non-judgmentalism and self-awareness (Birnbaum, 2008; Birnbaum & Birnbaum, 2008; Dekeyser, Raes, Leijssen, Leysen & Dewulf, 2008). The suggestion is an important one as it reflects and acknowledges the personal struggles of students especially in the social work learning context.

In Theme 3 fieldwork and placement learning were the dominant focus. The suggestions were attentive to the needs of students within their fieldwork and placement settings and the ideas that emerged essentially centred on enriching the learning experiences in this context. Furthermore, these suggestions are important as they are helpful strategies to sufficiently induct students into fieldwork practice for the year level, as well as for ongoing preparation sessions so that students could feel more self-contained, knowledgeable and confident about expectations and requirements.

## **DISCUSSION AND STUDY RECOMMENDATIONS**

The three key suggestions from participants emphasised that students in HEIs (mostly adult learners) desire to be active participants in class; that they want lecturers to be

more meaningfully engaged with them as whole human beings; and that their fieldwork and placement learning must not only take their needs (their “wholeness”) into account but also their learning needs for fieldwork/placement learning, with particular reference to mindfulness practices that would teach and enhance self-awareness. However, the findings do not suggest that all social work students have endured harrowing childhood experiences. The majority of students in the population, however, did indicate levels of adverse childhood experiences.

The findings also show the need to rethink and reorganise the curriculum structure and design, as well as to incorporate aspects to familiarise staff with students’ learning profiles and what these mean for teaching and learning. The value of knowing social work students’ learning profiles lies in increased understanding of both context (social circumstances) and personal characteristics, because it is the combination of the two that determines students’ emotional reactions within the learning environment. The impact of ACEs is particularly linked to the learning profiles of social work students. Consequently this study has contributed to the knowledge relating to the significance of the learning profiles of social work students.

Participants’ suggestions have supported the notion of lecturers understanding students’ learning profiles in teaching and learning. These suggestions have strongly related to TLT as a learning philosophy and theory. The use of transformative learning methods is vital because of the personal transformative impact on the student. Therefore when one considers their experiences prior to their HE studies, the choice of TLT becomes clear.

The following teaching and learning recommendations can be made on the basis of the findings.

### **The professional use of self in the context of professional learning**

The study’s findings and conclusions have converged to produce the following considerations for the professional learning context.

- The professional use of self (including the focus on counter-transference, intersubjectivity, self-disclosure and empathy) in an appropriate place in the existing social work curriculum to maximise optimal learning in terms of theory and practice.
- Introduction of contemporary psychodynamic theories (for example, intersubjectivity theory or relational theory) that would refocus attention on the socio-emotional factors forming the basis of behaviour, feelings and emotions, and development of awareness of how these link with early experiences, both in terms of students’ self-awareness and their understanding of how they affect their clients.
- The inclusion of mindfulness practices in fieldwork learning to support students’ post-traumatic growth, and teach self-awareness (such as facilitating self-observation and introspection regarding personal reactions, strengths, motives and histories) to develop insight and perceptiveness regarding feelings, behaviours and virtue ethics. These activities would contribute to the development of a professional identity, specifically developing a personal philosophy of practice. Examples of teaching practices are: journaling, reaction papers (after an exercise), seminar discussions, role

plays, video/films, genograms, ecomaps and life history timelines (Heydt & Sherman, 2005).

- Consider the capabilities approach especially to support fieldwork education, which facilitates the focus on self-efficacy and which addresses students' past and present experiences and relates to their learning needs.
- Use the transformative learning approaches, for example, problem-based learning methods such as case studies of real-world issues, and critical reflective tasks such as thought-provoking interchanges, observations, reflective recall activities, and journal writing to facilitate introspection and future perspectives (looking backward, inward, outward and forward).
- Promote student self-development through facilitating skills regarding student self-assessment of personal strengths, social work and academic abilities that will be authentic and based within a growth and development context. In addition, all teaching staff should encourage and implement structured appraisals of students for a composite view of student profiles to be used to inform teaching and learning responsiveness.

### **Development of lecturers' immediacy behaviours**

This refers to lecturers' immediacy behaviours which relate to the lecturer-student relationship and interaction. Therefore it is recommended that lecturers:

- Extend lecturer presence in the class context through open and active interaction and engagement with students during class activities (alongside the use of constructivist teaching methods);
- Increase lecturer credibility and trustworthiness in interactions with students through behaviours that show values (such as consistency, fairness, non-judging and non-discrimination) for students to endorse and affirm lecturers' trustworthiness;
- Develop the use of lecturers' self-disclosure that links up with the topic under discussion to benefit from the lecturers' experiences and knowledge.

### **Responding to students' emotional needs and vicarious traumatisation**

Based on the study's findings and conclusions, three tasks concern the appropriate response to students' emotional needs and vicarious traumatisation. It is recommended that lecturers:

- Incorporate structured debriefing sessions in class using case vignettes for discussion, reflection and (appropriate) self-disclosure;
- Manage student self-disclosure to preserve confidentiality (taking place in consultation) and/or maintain principles of non-judging and acceptance (taking place in class), where discussion is structured and topic-specific;
- Clarify appropriate lecturer and fieldwork supervisor responses to students' emotional reactions that include timeliness, appropriateness and sensitivity.

These recommendations provide an alternative framework from which to view social work students' past and present learning experiences. These recommendations could contribute to students fulfilling their potential and completing their studies despite the effects of childhood adversities. In the assessment of the social work competencies of students, Gibbons, Bore, Munro and Powis (2007) identified two vital factors, namely the resolution of adverse experiences and the lack of narcissism. The implementation of the recommendations from the study would directly address these factors.

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