Development of Professional Identity in Social Work Education

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Development of Professional Identity in Social Work Education

by

Janet L. Holter

A Banded Dissertation in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Social Work

St. Catherine University | University of St. Thomas
School of Social Work

May 2018
Abstract

The development of social work professional identity is characterized by internalization of the knowledge, skills, values, and mission of social work, and begins with and is shaped by the content, and interactions, as well as student experiences within the context of the social work education curricula. This Banded Dissertation comprising three products centers on the development of professional identity within undergraduate social work education. The first product is a qualitative study in which the author examined student perceptions of professional identity, student definitions and perceptions of how social work education shapes students’ professional identity. Findings showed that intentional development of professional identity is essential for social work education; as such, field education has a significant role in professional identity development. The second product is a conceptual paper focusing on professional identity development in the context of field education. Utilizing symbolic interactionism as a theoretical framework, the paper examined factors affecting student professional identity development within the context of social work field education and discusses implications for field instructors and field education curricula. The third product is a presentation of product 2 at the Council on Social Work Education’s 63rd Annual Program Meeting in October of 2017. This presentation outlined current research on professional identity development through the lens of symbolic interactionism, focusing on field education. The three products of this Banded Dissertation emphasize professional identity development as an essential function of social work education. This work has implications for social work educators seeking to develop curricula to assist students in their development of a strong professional identity.

Keywords: professional identity, professionalism, symbolic interactionism, social work education, field education, signature pedagogy
Acknowledgements/Dedication

I would first like to thank the faculty and staff of the DSW program for their guidance and support over the course of this program. I gratefully acknowledge Dr. Kingsley Chigbu for your positivity, and for continually challenging me to develop as an educator and scholar. I thank the members of Cohort 2 for your humor, support, and your friendship. I also thank Debra Daehn-Zellmer, Dr. Connie Fossen, and Dr. Jennifer Anderson-Meger; my colleagues, who supported this endeavor with their humor, and unending kindness. I finally thank my parents, who planted the seed of possibility at an early age.

I dedicate this work to my family: Jarrod, Carsey, and Cailyn, whose love and patience were my calm center throughout—this would not have been possible without you.
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The development of professional identity is an essential function of social work education. Social work professional identity is defined as the internalization of knowledge, skills, professional norms, behaviors, values and the mission of social work, and the development of a commitment to work at micro, mezzo and macro levels of practice with a focus on social justice (Adams, Hean, Sturgis, & Macleod, 2006; Bogo, Raphael, & Roberts, 1993). The process of professional development in social work begins with the acquisition and development of knowledge and skills, then moving to understanding the profession in terms of one’s own values and beliefs, before finally incorporating these with the values of the profession in creation of their own professional identity (Tseng, 2011).

Divergence in relation to social work professional identity is historical, and dates to settlement houses and charity organizations as we debated the role of social work in society; the professions’ lack of ability to agree on and articulate our role impacted the development of professional identity in social work students (Pullen, Sansfacon & Crete, 2016). Social work is a diverse profession, serving varied populations at multiple levels of practice, and while this is considered a strength of the profession, this diversity contributes to a lack of direction or “lack of commonly recognized symbols” (Loseke & Cahill, 1986, p. 255). These issues in addition to the fact that social work often utilizes research and theory from other professions have interfered with the ability of the profession to cultivate a common identity, impacting professional identity development (Gilbert, 1977; Loseke & Cahill, 1986; Higgins, 2016).

Studies on professional identity have largely focused on professional preferences of students and new practitioners indicating preferences for micro level clinical work rather than work with varied populations at multiple levels of practice (Bogo et al., 1993; Loseke & Cahill,
1986; Sha, Wong, Lou, Pearson, & Gu, 2012; Weiss, Gal, & Chann, 2004). Bogo et al., (1993) maintained that these preferences were due the inability of social work education programs to develop a strong professional identity in social work students. Subsequent research, however, indicated that these preferences were less to do with a lack of professional identity development than the influence of national, social, and political contexts such as threats of professional dysregulation, job markets, and poor public perception (Sha, Wong, Lou, Pearson, & Gu, 2012; Weiss, Gal, & Chann, 2004; Wiles, 2017). Students faced similar issues in field education and were identified as ill equipped to reconcile their positive notions with poor public perceptions of the profession, and varying social and political challenges resulting in professional preferences that may not align with the values and mission of social work (Loseke & Cahill, 1986).

The work completed for this Banded Dissertation adds to the literature on the development of professional identity in social work education. This Banded Dissertation includes a conceptual paper focusing on current research on professional identity through the lens of symbolic interactionism, a qualitative study exploring student understanding and perceptions of professional identity development and a discussion of a peer-reviewed presentation on the conceptual paper, focusing on professional identity within the context of field education.
Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this Banded Dissertation is grounded in the 2015 Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) and symbolic interactionism. Utilizing a “competency based education framework” (Council on Social Work Education, 2015, p. 6), the EPAS guide social work education in the administration of social work educational programs to help students develop as knowledgeable, competent, ethical social workers, capable of social work practice (CSWE, 2015). The concept of professionalism and professional identity is interwoven throughout the 2015 (EPAS), most noticeably in Competency one:

Social workers understand the value base of the profession and its ethical standards as well as relevant laws and regulations that may impact practice at the micro, mezzo and macro levels. Social workers recognize personal values and the distinction between personal and professional values. They also understand how their personal experiences and affective reactions influence their professional judgement and behavior. Social workers understand the profession’s history, its mission, and the roles and responsibilities of the profession. (CSWE, 2015, p. 7)

Professional identity is addressed again, in Educational Policy (EP) 2.2, Signature Pedagogy: Field Education:

Signature pedagogies are elements of instruction and of socialization that teach future practitioners the fundamental dimensions of professional work in their discipline-to think, to preform, and to act ethically and with integrity. Field education is the signature pedagogy for social work. The intent of field education is to integrate the theoretical and conceptual contribution of the classroom with the practical world of the practice setting.
It is a basic precept of social work education that they two interrelated components of curriculum-classroom and field-are of equal importance within the curriculum, and each contributes to the development of the requisite competencies of professional practice. (CSWE, 2015, p. 12)

The elements of professional identity as discussed in the literature are not explicitly discussed as such in the EPAS; however, these elements are integrated into the EPAS competencies, behaviors and standards. These standards the guide the development of curricula in social work education programs, and as such, are a lens, through which this Banded Dissertation is constructed.

As a theoretical framework for this Banded Dissertation, symbolic interactionism posits that identity is created through language, symbols and interactions in one’s environment. Language and symbols are interpreted and assigned meanings, resulting in individual behavior (Carter& Fuller, 2016; Forte, 2004b; Stryker, 1987). In relation to the process of professional identity development, Tseng (2011) maintains that this process begins with the development of knowledge, however as students begin to process the information they receive through the social work education curricula, including field education, they integrate these symbols with their own values, creating meaning, then their own professional identity. Stryker’s (1987) view of symbolic interactionism assists in further explaining roles and identity, explaining how individuals utilize social context and their perceptions of how others view them as they create their own identity (Carter & Fuller, 2016; Stryker, 1987). Similarly, symbolic interactionism assumes that symbols are not only received from other individuals, but from an individual’s environment, and this environmental influence also influences behavior (Forte, 2004b; Stryker, 1987; Wagner, 1974).
The tenets and assumptions of symbolic interactionism served as the theoretical lens of this Banded Dissertation examining the symbols, language, interactions and context that contribute to the development of professional identity within the context of social work education.

**Summary of Banded Dissertation Products**

This Banded Dissertation consists of three products:

Product 1: “Feeling Like a Professional”- Undergraduate Perceptions on the Development of Social Work Professional Identity

Product 2: Development of Professional Identity through Social Work Field Education

Product 3: Presentation- Development of Professional Identity through Social Work Field Education

This Banded Dissertation examines the development of professional identity in social work education. Intentional focus on the development of professional identity in social work education curricula is essential to ensure students are not only able to develop the skills necessary for social work practice, but they also internalize the mission and values of the social work profession.

The first product of this Banded Dissertation is a qualitative study which examined student perceptions of their identity development as a professional social worker. The author study utilized focus groups to explore students’ definitions of professional identity, and examined their perceptions of how their professional identity was developed through the social work professional curriculum, including focus on the impact of field education. The author found
that student perceptions were largely consistent with recommendations and findings in the literature on professional identity development, supporting focused, intentional development on professional identity development in undergraduate social work education.

The second product of this Banded Dissertation consists of a conceptual paper focusing on the development of professional identity in field education. While the literature discussed professional identity development within the context of social work education, little exists on the impact of field education on this process. Using symbolic interactionism as the theoretical framework, the author discussed the literature and outlined implications for field education curricula, including intentional focus on professional development in field education, and training for field instructors.

Product three of this Banded Dissertation is a presentation titled the Development of Professional Identity through Social Work Field Education at the Council on Social Work Education 63rd Annual Program Meeting (APM) in Dallas, Texas on October 20, 2017. The Conference provided an opportunity to present the paper written for product 2 of this Banded Dissertation - professional identity development in field education using the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism. Current literature was outlined, and implications for field education were discussed. The author paid specific attention to the role of field instructors on the process of identity development.

This Banded Dissertation adds to the literature and discussion of professional identity development within the context of social work education. While much of the literature focuses on factors contributing to and influencing professional identity development, this work focuses
on student perceptions and understanding of professional development, the impact of field education, and implications for social work curricula.

While much of the literature on professional identity development focuses on factors contributing to professional identity development, few examine student perceptions of professional identity, nor discuss implications for curricula. Overall findings of this Banded Dissertation support explicit inclusion of professional identity development in social work curricula. In the research study, students had difficulty creating a concrete definition of professional identity, however were able to discuss the elements of professional identity as indicated in the literature. Curricula elements such as role play/simulation activities and service opportunities are essential to facilitating skill development and helping students understand the unique aspects of the profession. Field education is similarly critical in assisting students in socializing students to the profession, and understanding the diversity of the profession. Field education also helps students understand the impacts of social, political, and organizational contexts is critical; and reconcile these with their own values and believes as they internalize the mission and values of the social work profession in creation of a professional identity.

Through language, symbols, and interactions received during their education, students assign meaning and create their professional identity. This process is often treated as implicit rather than explicit, without intentional focus within the curriculum. Field instructors must not only be educated on the mission and objectives of field education, but also on the process of professional identity development for inclusion in the field education curriculum.
Implications for Social Work Education

The discussions and findings contained in this Banded Dissertation support intentional focus on the development of professional identity within social work curricula. The research conducted examining student definitions and perceptions of professional identity development highlighted the developmental nature of social work education, with students identifying the importance of scaffolding in building their identity as a professional. This is supported by Tseng’s (2011) discussion of the process of professional identity development, beginning with acquisition of knowledge and skills, moving to identification and integration of one’s own values and beliefs with those of the profession, resulting in a professional identity. The provision of experiential activities such as case studies, service learning, and role play/simulation were also identified as not only developing skill, but assisting students in building their identity as a professional social worker.

Consistent with Wiles (2017) findings regarding the definition of professional identity, students had difficulty developing a concrete definition of professional identity, although their discussions included elements of professional identity as described in the literature. Of particular interest, were students’ discussions on generalist social work practice. Students identified “baseline skills” necessary for practice, and identified these skills as contributing to their identity as a professional social worker. Students also identified the importance of the unique elements and perspective of social work as contributing to their professional identity. However, when speaking about their identity as social workers, students largely discussed this in terms of their agency field experiences rather than as a generalist. The impact of diversity in practice has also been noted as impacting professional identity; these variations influence how social workers
identify themselves as social workers, with concerns that the focus of generalist practice is lost (Gilbert, 1977; Higgins, 2016). The socialization process was also identified as essential in assisting students to internalize the norms, values, and identity of their profession (Barretti, 2004; Moorhead, 2014). The elements of the socialization process, as discussed by Barretti (2004), were identified discussed by students as essential to the development of professional identity, particularly when discussing the impact of field education on professional identity development.

Field education facilitates the development of a strong professional identity through experiences that challenge students’ early perceptions of social work practice, allowing them to address and reconcile any challenge to their perceptions through work with field instructors and faculty in the social work program. Self-assessment, reflective supervision and a strong relationship between student and field instructor help ensure a meaningful field experience. Ben Shlomo, Levy, and Itzhaky, (2012) and Ornstein and Moses (2010) also stress the importance of these strong relationships, as well as a collaborative, reflective supervision process as essential to the development of a strong professional identity. Social work education programs must recognize the impact of field education, in assisting students to understand their identity as a generalist through varied content, and experiential activities at all levels of practice while helping students understand the nature of specialization. Intentional focus on this, particularly through field education will assist students in developing their identity as a generalist, while understanding diverse practice in agency settings.

While the creation of a professional identity requires one to assign meaning to symbols, interactions and relationships, students require the guidance of a field instructor to help them understand these symbols through a supportive positive relationship which is reflective in nature.
Field instructors ought to be specifically trained and prepared to work with students to develop their professional identity rather than treating this as an implicit process. Knight’s (2000) findings indicated student perceptions of a successful field experience included field instructors who were educated on the mission and goals of field education, program expectation for learning, supervision, and on the process of professional identity development within the context of field. Field instructors must additionally be educated on how to help students address issues related to political and social contexts, and assists students in reconciling these sometimes-difficult contexts with reconcile these with student differing or idealized notions of the profession.

**Implications for Future Research**

Development of a strong professional identity is essential for the proliferation of the social work profession, and as such, future research in this area is warranted. A larger sample examining student understanding and perceptions of professional identity development at undergraduate and graduate levels might provide additional clarity, and details for development of social work curricula in relation to professional identity development at various levels of practice. In addition, examining faculty and field instructor perceptions in contrast with student perceptions may provide insights on similarities and contradictions to assist in building curricula related to professional identity development. Additional research on student understanding of generalist practice in relation to professional identity is warranted, as is examination of mechanisms to assist students in developing their identity as a generalist especially within the context of undergraduate field education. Finally, future research should focus on professional identity development within the context of Interprofessional education, occurring throughout the social work education curriculum.
Conclusion

The development of a strong professional identity is essential for the advancement and proliferation of the social work profession. The research in this Banded Dissertation explored student perceptions with clear implications for intentional focus in all areas of social work curricula on professional identity development, while the conceptual article focused on field education, and the need for training for field instructors. Students who leave their social work education programs with a strong professional identity are able to practice as generalists, navigating the political and social challenges of the day, and serving society at multiple levels with a clear focus on social justice, congruent with the mission of social work.
References


PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT


“Feeling Like a Professional”- Undergraduate Student Perceptions on the Development of Social Work Professional Identity

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Abstract

Undergraduate social work students develop a professional identity as they internalize the knowledge, skills, values and mission of the social work profession. This study examined student perceptions of professional identity development through focus group sessions with undergraduate seniors in field education. While students had difficulty creating a concrete definition of professional identity, elements discussed were consistent with definitions from the literature. Findings indicated the importance of the developmental nature of social work education, highlighting field education as essential in socialization to the profession, assisting students in their development of skills, values and mission of the profession. Implications for undergraduate social work education programs are discussed, focusing on the importance of socialization, scaffolding educational experiences, and working with students, particularly within the context of field education to understand the impact of political and social contexts on their perceptions to assist students in their development of a strong social work professional identity.

Keywords: professional identity, professionalism, symbolic interactionism, social work education, field education, signature pedagogy
“Feeling like a Professional”- Undergraduate Student Perceptions on the Development of Social Work Professional Identity

While the concept of professional identity development has been explored in contemporary social work literature, few studies explore students’ definitions and understanding of professional identity, nor their perceptions on how this development is impacted by social work education. Professional identity development involves the internalization of skills and values, as well as the mission of the social work profession, which includes a commitment to serving all populations at multiple levels of practice (Adams, Hean, Sturgis, & Macleod, 2006; Bogo, Raphael, & Roberts, 1993). Professional identity is not explicitly discussed within the 2015 Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS); however, the EPAS competencies and behaviors include elements of professionalism, skills, values and focus on work with vulnerable populations as essential competencies for social work practice (CSWE, 2015).

Studies exploring professional identity have focused on measuring professional identity development as evidenced by student preferences regarding population, level of practice, and agency setting (Bogo, et al., 1993; Loseke & Cahill, 1986; Sha, Wong, Lou, Pearson, & Gu, 2012; Wong & Pearson, 2007). Using these indicators, Bogo et al. (1993) raised concerns that students were failing to develop a strong professional identity within the context of social work education. Subsequent studies however, concluded that professional identity development was impacted by societal and political contexts rather than a failure on the part of social work education programs to facilitate student development of professional identity (Loseke & Cahill, 1986; Sha et al., 2012; Wong & Pearson, 2007). Professional identity development was also impacted by student experiences in field education; students have difficulties reconciling the
realities of practice with their often-idealized perceptions of the profession (Adams et al., 2006; Loseke & Cahill, 1986; Sha et al., 2012; Tseng, 2011; Wong & Pearson, 2007).

Student development of a strong social work professional identity is important to ensure social workers begin practice with a commitment to the mission, values, and skills of the social work profession. However, the way that students define and understand professional identity development, and the impact of social work education on professional identity is largely unexplored. What are undergraduate social work student definitions of professional identity? What are student perceptions on how undergraduate social work education programs develop professional identity, and how does field education impact student development? Through thematic analysis, data gathered from undergraduate social work seniors explored students’ definitions and perceptions of professional identity development, leading to discussion of implications for social work education programs. In continually evolving political and social environments, it is essential for social work education to examine students’ perceptions of professional identity development within the context of undergraduate social work education, to guide undergraduate program and curriculum development, ensuring the students’ commitment to the mission and values of social work, and continued advancement of the profession.

**Literature Review**

**Professional Identity Development**

Social work professional identity is characterized by internalization of the knowledge, values, and skills of the profession, as well as development of a commitment to the mission of social work, focusing on work with vulnerable populations at all levels of practice (Adams et al., 2006; Bogo et al., 1993). The literature expands on this definition; professional identity requires a social worker to integrate their sense of self, worldviews, professional knowledge, and skill as
part of developing a commitment to the profession (Moorhead, Boetto, & Bell, 2014). Gilbert (1977) maintained that social work has historically been challenged to establish a professional identity, citing the diversity of social work practice, as well as the fact that social work has traditionally utilized theory and research from other professions. This diversity makes it difficult to articulate the role of social work in society (Higgins, 2016; Loseke & Cahill, 1986). However, professional identity is essential to the proliferation and survival of the social work profession, providing legitimacy within the professional world, and enabling members to fulfill their mission within society (Moorhead et al., 2014).

Factors Impacting Professional Identity Development

Adams, Hean, Sturgis, and Macleod (2006) explored professional identity development in first-year health care students, including medical, nursing, and social work programs. Findings indicated that students had a measure of professional identity upon entering their programs. Additionally, students with more knowledge of their profession (through prior employment), knowledge of team work processes, and cognitive flexibility (which refers to one’s ability to be flexible when constructing knowledge) in relation to practice measured as having higher levels of professional identity. However, social work students measured as having poor professional identities in relation to first-year students in other professional programs. The authors do not offer a hypothesis regarding weak professional identity in social work students, other than noting that this may be related to gender stereotypes, and identifying this issue as an area for future research. Professional identity development unfolds over the course of professional education programs, particularly as students are exposed to the realities of practice through field education and clinical placements. Through these placements, students are socialized into their profession, and begin to reconcile their idealized notions of the profession with the realities of practice. This
development however, requires strong professional role models, and structured reflection for learning and development to take place (2006).

Ben Shlomo, Levy, and Itzhaky (2012) examined the impact of “organizational resources (satisfaction with supervision), personal resources (empathic concern, self-differentiation, and sense of coherence), and environmental resources (values)” (Ben Shlomo et al., 2012 p. 241) on the professional identity development of undergraduate social work students. Satisfaction with supervision in field education, and understanding of student personal values directly impacted professional identity development. The authors cited the need for reflective, developmental supervision within the context of field education, and for social work educators to be cognizant of all three types of resources in curriculum development (2012). The literature reviewed noted the importance of socialization, and reflective practice through supervision in field education as impacting the development of professional identity, however, additional themes in the literature highlighted the impact of national, political, and social contexts on the development of professional identity.

Impact of National, Political, & Social Contexts on Professional Identity Development

Social work in the United Kingdom has been characterized as a “troubled and troubling profession” (Dominelli, 2004, as cited in Higgins, 2016, p. 58), leading to research on the impact of societal perceptions on social work student professional identity (Higgins, 2016). The role of social work in society remains undefined; professions such as nursing and education have consistent expectations, while no such expectations exist for the social work profession. Using social identity theory as a theoretical framework, the author discussed professional identity development within the context of a group. As students move through the educational process, they begin to identify unique elements of their profession, and internalize these as group
members. However, the inability of society and the profession to clearly define the role of social work, interferes with this development. The author examined professional identity development in social work students through interviews with faculty, students, clients, and field instructors. Through these interviews, themes emerged, all of which impacted the professional identity development of students (Higgins, 2016). Students and beginning practitioners internalized the perceptions held by society of social workers as “Villains, Fools, or Heroes” (Higgins, 2016, p. 59). The view of social workers as “villains” was shaped by societal stigmas related to requiring social work services, or of mandatory involvement with social workers, including child welfare services. Perceptions of social workers as “fools” reflected beliefs that social workers needlessly attempt to serve those who cannot change, or question why one would enter a profession with low status, and little recognition. The perception of social workers as “heroes” also emerged. Social workers are viewed by society as unsung heroes who have a unique, holistic approach to helping, and intervene with other systems on behalf of their clients. Social workers are also viewed as being knowledgeable about social and political environments, and serving those who are most vulnerable in society. Similarly, social workers as “heroes” are viewed as individuals willing to address issues in society that other professions are unwilling/unable to address. These themes, as examples of social contexts that exist in the United Kingdom, were identified as significantly influencing the development of professional identity in social work students and beginning practitioners. Students and beginning practitioners expressed varied understanding of the incongruence in these themes, and some understanding of how these perceptions impact students internalize the mission of social work. Professional identity is developed as students develop understanding of these perceptions, and process them in relation to the knowledge, skills, mission, and values of social work. The author maintained that professional identity is
developed as students reflect on, and compare these elements as unique to the social work profession (Higgins, 2016).

Campanini, Frost, and Hojer (2012) addressed professional identity development through examination of student perceptions of social work based on national contexts. Similar to Higgins (2016), the authors explored how individuals develop professional identity within the context of a group as they identify and internalize specific traits attributed to the profession. The authors discussed professional identity as developed through socialization and the development of skills, knowledge of theory, understanding of values and ethics, as well as the acquisition of language specific to the profession. This study examined how social work professional identity development was influenced and constructed within differing political and social contexts, specifically focusing on the impact of policies, economy and societal perceptions on professional identity development. Students in three different national contexts: United Kingdom, Sweden, and Italy, defined traits required for social work practice differently as influenced by varying political and social contexts. Students in the United Kingdom and Sweden emphasized understanding of theory, skill development, and continued professional development within the context of field education as critical in their development of professional identity. Students in Italy placed high emphasis on students having understanding of political contexts as essential for practice, and in their developing identity as a social worker. The authors cited differing political contexts in these countries as impacting these perceptions, as social work in England and Sweden is viewed as more stable than in Italy; Italian social work is largely unregulated, with many social workers working under “short-term contracts” (Campanini, et al., 2012, p. 44). Students from all three countries emphasized the importance of their social work education
program, particularly field education, in shaping their identity as a professional social worker (Campanini et al., 2012).

In further exploration of the impact of political and social contexts on professional identity development, Hill, Fogel, Plitt Donaldson, and Erickson (2017) examined how state definitions of social work and social work practice impact professional identity. The authors examined state social work definitions in the United States from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Statutory definitions were reviewed to examine the extent to which macro practice skills and methods were reflected. The extent to which clinical language was utilized in statutory language and definitions was also examined. Twenty-nine of 51 state statute definitions reflected a comprehensive discussion of social work practice, reflecting all levels of practice, while 14 of 51 statute definitions did not contain any element of macro practice. Twenty-one of 51 statute definitions were found to have a “clinical orientation” or be “clinically dominant” (Hill et al., 2017, p. 272); with researchers finding definitions focused largely on clinical practice. These definitions shape social work practice, where students ultimately experience field education, thus impacting their professional identity development. The authors also argued that these definitions shape social work education program curricula, affecting how schools educate and socialize students as social work professionals. These definitions, in conjunction with present social and political contexts, particularly the realities of job markets for social workers, lead students to choose clinical practice over community or macro practice options (Hill et al., 2017).

The findings of Hill, Fogel, Plitt Donaldson, and Erickson (2017) are congruent with the findings of a study completed by Sha, Wong, Lou, Pearson, and Gu (2012) who explored career preferences of social work students in China. As the social work profession emerged in China, educators found students preferred to enter clinical practice over family, group, or community
work, and were concerned that students were not internalizing the mission and values of the social work profession, as indicated by their preferences for employment after completion of their social work program. Undergraduate and graduate students in China surveyed about their career preferences indicated interest in working in therapeutic or clinical settings rather than engaging in family, case management, group, or community work. Study participants expressed desires to work with various populations, at differing levels of practice, however cited poor job markets, and higher status for clinical work as reasons for their preferences. Student preferences for clinical practice were attributed to societal factors such as poor public perception of the profession, and poor job markets rather than student failure to internalize the mission and values of social work (2012).

Wiles (2017) explored issues related to social work professional identity development within the United Kingdom. The author described the state of social work in Europe as being in flux, with threats of dysregulation to the social work profession posing a direct threat to social work professional identity development. Student perceptions of their professional identity development, within the context of the current political upheaval in relation to social work practice were explored. Study findings indicated that students were challenged in defining professional identity, however themes did emerge. Students identified the value base of social work, and a holistic approach to practice as unique to social work. Students also discussed the importance of understanding one’s own personal values, as well as understanding how their values intersect with the values of the profession. Citing these findings, the author advocated for use of a structured approach to professional identity development in social work, using the Professional Capacity Framework (PCF). The author maintained that a strong professional
identity is essential for students to be able to navigate these political contexts for social workers to fulfill the mission of social work (Wiles, 2017).

Moorhead et al. (2014) outlined the need for social work education to socialize students into the profession, incorporating local, national and political contexts. The authors explored the impact of a short-term study abroad program on undergraduate professional identity. Study participants reported better self-assessment skills, better understanding of personal and professional self, and increased understanding of work with disadvantaged populations. Students also reported higher confidence, and more commitment to the profession as a result of these programs which exposed them to diverse populations and different political and social contexts (2014).

Finally, Tseng (2011) examined the need for social work educators to understand the impact of current societal contexts, specifically, socio-economic factors, technology, and generational influences, on students of development of professional identity. Tseng identified stages for professional identity development: students begin their professional identity development with the application of knowledge and skills, they then move to understand their profession in terms of their own values and beliefs, finally progressing to assign “personal meaning and significance” (p. 373) in their understanding of their profession. Tseng concluded that educators must recognize that the development of professional identity is a process, and must construct their curriculum, including field education taking into account these societal contexts (2011).
Method

This qualitative research study examined undergraduate social work students’ perceptions of professional identity development, focusing on student definitions of professional identity and their perceptions of how social work programs foster professional identity, particularly as impacted by field education. The study sample was drawn from undergraduate social work students at a small, private, Midwestern university. To be considered as eligible for this study, students must have achieved undergraduate senior status, and entered field education.

University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was gained after submission for an expedited review. Participants were recruited utilizing university email, which explained purpose and description of this study, and informed consent forms. Informed consent forms, which were signed at the beginning of the first focus group session, discussed the time commitment required, and outlined the voluntary nature of this study; participation would not affect course grades, nor completion of the social work program. This study utilized two focus group sessions to gather qualitative data from nine (N=9) senior undergraduate social work students during weeks eleven and fourteen, of a fifteen-week field placement occurring in the final semester of the social work program. A focus group allows for “a group of people to be brought together to talk about their lives and experiences in a free-flowing, open-ended discussions that usually focus on a single topic” (Grinnell, Williams, & Unrau, 2016, p. 532). Questions in these semi-structured sessions focused on student definitions of professional identity, student perceptions of how professional identity is developed within the context of a social work program, and student perceptions of their development and identity as a professional social worker, particularly as impacted by field education. Focus group sessions were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. After transcription, data gathered from students were analyzed through thematic analysis. Data were
coded and analyzed using color codes to identify and organize emerging themes, and discrepancies, as well as changes in data from the first group to the second.

A potential limitation of this study lies in the researcher/facilitator being a faculty member within the social work program at this university. To mitigate this limitation, positionality of researcher was acknowledged. Within qualitative research:

Positionality is a research method to mitigate bias. The method relies on disclosures of position that play in the decision-making process of human subject research. In application, positionality is achieved not only by candid admission of one’s biographical orientation, but also by subsequent self-reflection to bracket, not exclude this orientation from the research design and process”. (Relles, 2016, p. 313)

Positionality allows the researcher to acknowledge potential impact in the process, and engage participants in discussion around a topic; potential bias is considered in data collection, analysis and conclusions (Relles, 2016). In addition, all study participants were female, with all identifying as Caucasian. However, despite this lack of diversity and a small sample size, a focus group format allowed participants to discuss the topic in an open-ended format.

**Findings**

This study set out to examine student perceptions of professional identity development. Analysis of the data gathered through student focus group discussions revealed elements students identified as essential or influential in the development of professional identity as largely congruent with definitions and elements cited in the literature. Students’ perceptions are discussed in turn, first focusing on how students defined professional identity, then examining students’ perceptions of the impact of social work education, including field education in this professional identity development.
Student Definitions of Professional Identity

The first question posed to students focused on how students define professional identity. Students struggled to create a concrete definition of professional identity, instead engaging in discussion around different elements that make up professional identity. Students first discussed professional presentation and professionalism, including dress and communication as elements of professional identity, however, this discussion quickly changed into discussions of one “feeling like a professional”, and what this meant. The elements discussed by students were consistent with definitions from the literature; professional identity developed through the internalization of skills, and values as well as the mission of social work practice which includes a commitment to serving all populations at all levels of practice (Adams et al., 2006; Bogo et al., 1993). “[Professional identity] is the way you present yourself in professional settings, and handle different situations, the ability to be flexible”. (Student 1) Another student discussed professional identity in terms of knowledge: “It is the knowledge or the ability to get that knowledge makes you a professional as well, you know where to get what you need”. (Student 6)

Identification and understanding of the mission of the social work profession were also included in the definition of professional identity. Student discussions of the definition of professional identity development focused on the principles and values of the National Association of Social Work (NASW) Code of Ethics; these values were discussed as an essential part of what helps students identify themselves as a professional social worker. “I am a double major, Psychology, and Social Work. I hold myself to the NASW Code of Ethics…I find our Code of Ethics so much more applicable to even just who I am as a person, particularly the values that are included there”. (Student 4) Another student stated: “I could not agree more about the ethics, I also think though the way we think is really more unique”. (Student 1)
Students focused on, and identified the perspective of social work as unique, stating that this perspective and approach to work with clients was an important part of their identity as a professional social worker. “I think our view is more holistic”. (Student 8) “We are systems theory”. (Student 3) “We [Social Workers] take in all perspectives before coming to a conclusion, we do not think as black and white as say, nursing”. (Student 7) “I think our goals as social workers are different as well, different than nurses of physician’s goals”. (Student 9) “And I think alone those lines, we are taught in so many different ways how to help people. Whether it is through researcher, through advocacy, through just practice, in general”. (Student 4)

The values of the social work profession were identified as an important element of professional identity; discussed in terms professionals developing the ability to be reflective, develop boundaries, and understand their own values. Students discussed the development of a personal self, when the researcher inquired about this further, students discussed this in terms of the internalization of the values of the profession.

I would say for myself, personally, there is not much difference…as far as the way I feel inside, the way I think, I would say the biggest difference is the way I [professionally] present myself…I feel like my values are always the same deep down. Our values, and goals as a social worker, and even though sometimes you have to do things that you know are just…this is not me but, there might be a social worker who might be uncomfortable looking up where a client can get an abortion, but that is presenting your professional self, doing what you need to do for your job, but in your personal life, if it was a friend, you would try to consult them in a different way. (Student 5)
Impact of Social Work Education on Professional Identity Development

This study also explored student perceptions on the development of professional identity within the context of social work education. Students actively discussed how social work education programs impact professional identity development, identifying elements congruent with definitions of professional identity found in the literature. Within the context of social work education, students first discussed scaffolding content and experiences within a social work curriculum as important in the development of their identity as a professional social worker:

I like the way that it built up, obviously you take your intro class, and it builds on one another. I don’t know the material makes you think more and it becomes, I don’t want to say more rely but you get a really nice foundation with theories. Yeah, class examples and a lot of case studies and those types of things, then you start building it up, and then take interviewing then it becomes real. (Student 1)

I think starting out in intro, with having an interview and being exposed to a real social worker, and then our volunteer hours so we are not actually doing social worker, but we have to act in a professional manner, and just gradually building up until we get to field really helped. (Student 2)

Students also identified activities within practice and theory courses such as case studies, and role plays as essential to professional identity development, focusing on experiences which allows students to apply the knowledge, skills, and values they have developed in courses, in simulated practice situations: “I feel like [application] gives you additional confidence, and I can actually use these skills, and maybe I cannot now, but I would develop them”. (Student 4)

I think it always helps, to develop muscle memory in a sense. Like, you go through an ethical dilemma, you go through it in class, and you go through it and keep going through
it, and when you get into a field, come to a real ethical dilemma in the field of practice you know what to do, because you have done it in class, and you have applied and done it so much that it is second-hand nature. (Student 3)

“We did the simulation, which I thought was extremely helpful. It just kind of threw stuff at you, I wish we could have done more of that”. (Student 1)

Other parts of the social work program curriculum discussed as essential to professional identity development included courses focused on macro practice:

With policy being towards the end, that is real-life, that is what is happening. It shows the importance of social workers needing to stay current and up to date with that. For me, it is definitely part of my professional identity to be an advocate in the political arena, because that is a lot of what we do. You don’t have an option, for me it [policy] is a big part of my professional identity, and I stay on top of it (Student 1).

Additional elements of the social work curriculum, including research and organizational practice courses were similarly identified as contributing to students’ development as a holistic social work practitioner.

In analysis of the data, the importance of service as part of the curriculum in assisting students to internalize the mission and values of social work emerged as a theme. Students discussed service experiences as essential to the development of professional identity; viewing service, and the learning opportunities inherent as providing the ability to gain practice experience, and reflect on these experiences in relation to the content and skills necessary for social work practice. “…Our volunteer hours were not actually doing social work, but we have to act in a professional manner, and just gradually building that up until we get to field, I think that really helped”. (Student 2) “I think academically, if I was a professor here, I would push students
to be in the community more. From a social work standpoint, I would push, you be at (name of agency), you be at (name of agency)”. (Student 8)

The importance of service to others was further discussed as not just a forum for learning, but also as part of the mission of social work:

One thing I will say about service to the community, yesterday at a meeting, multiple students were going across the country to do service. At first, I felt guilty, I am not going to do service. Then I left and realized, my profession IS service. You know “business major”, you are not going to be out there every day helping people like social workers are. I will do my life in service to others. I am like, ok, you go do your year, I will do my life in service. (Student 1)

The Impact of Field Education on Professional Identity Development

Students described the impact of field education on their professional identity development in a concrete manner, also discussing this in terms of further development of knowledge, skill, and mission of social work practice. “Field is a different level, it teaches you no matter what setting you are in, how to act, how to present yourself”. (Student 1)

“[Field education] helps by observing other people and how they handle certain situations, and how they handle certain conflicts”. (Student 7)

Students spoke of field education as providing practice experiences with various populations, which helped them understand the realities of the profession through the development of boundaries, upholding social work values and ethics.

I think in my place, we have a lot of people who come in and need assistance with all of the stuff when they are competent with all of this stuff, when they are competent to do this themselves. To be able to see it is not unprofessional to be like “you can do this” and
allows people to do things for themselves. (Student 6) That is boundaries, and empowerment. (Student 8)

For me, I have been pushed a lot, my boundaries, more so my comfort zone. [My field instructor said] you can do this by yourself, giving me the tools, you will be fine, and sent me on my way. It was nice to hear her say good job. (Student 5)

My field placement is with two people primary, but another lady has been there like 36 years, forever. And when talking about releases, she is like “oh, I never get a release” I told her that I was going to get a release and she said no need, but I said I was going to get a release on this, and regardless of whether you say I need it or not, even if I do not know for sure I need it, professionally I should get it. (Student 1)

Students also spoke to learning facilitated through experiences which were not examples of exemplary practice, or were challenged their positive perceptions of social work practice.

I have seen instances where, just this week I was trying to set up a meeting and I realized we did not have a release of information to talk to the kiddos school. In the past, I was told we did, that makes me nervous, like what happened there? This kid has been in placement for a year? (Student 4)

There are a lot of things that fall through the cracks in immigration. I am trying to deal with that, would I be this overwhelmed or overtasked that I would not be able to do the appropriate follow-up and these people would be left hanging? Because I probably have 40 people sitting on my desk right now who have not been called since January. (Student 8)
Field instructors were identified as essential in assisting students in their professional identity development, particularly through self-assessment and reflection on practice experiences.

As a student, you need to be, as any professional as you grow, I mean you are never going to know everything, and you are never going to handle every situation to a “t” so I think self-reflection is pretty important as a student. (Student 1)

And like going off of that, not just at the end of the day or at the end of the week, at my placement, I would go in and do an initial assessment or something, and we would get done. They would ask “how do you think that went?” They put it back on my because I would be harder on myself than they would. (Student 2)

My instructor is always like “how did that make you feel, like when you hear those kids talk about suicide?” How does that feel addressing the tough things that everyone does not want to address? (Student 7)

Finally, students spoke to how they would address professional identity as a field instructor:

I would do it right away, and teach them structure, teach them the mission of whatever agency I am at, and the vision. I would make them comfortable, and be compassionate so they could come to me if there is something, please do not be afraid to ask, or say that I cannot do this. Umm, I think that is so important. (Student 8)

**Discussion**

Consistent with definitions in the literature, study participants defined professional identity as the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and internalization of the values and mission of social work practice. Within the context of social work education, participants identified the importance of scaffolding educational experiences in professional identity development;
experiential learning experiences such as role play/simulation, and service opportunities were discussed as essential in helping students construct their identity as emerging professionals. Similarly, students identified the social work curriculum, particularly field education, as critical in assisting students in understanding the unique perspective of social work, which was identified as an element of professional identity. In further exploration of the impact of field education on professional identity development, students identified the importance of field education in socializing students to the profession. Similarly, field instructors and reflective supervision were identified as critical in this process of professional identity development.

Congruent with examination of student perceptions on professional identity by Wiles (2017), student participants in this study struggled to develop a concrete definition of professional identity. Elements of professional identity discussed by students within the context of the focus group, however, were consistent with definitions from the literature (Adams et al., 2006; Bogo et al., 1993; Moorhead, 2014; Wiles, 2017), stating that professional identity involves not only the development of knowledge, and skills necessary for practice, but internalization of mission and values of the profession. Participants also defined professional identity through internalization of professional values, as well as integration of a sense of self and development of a worldview consistent with social work values and the mission of the social work profession.

Additional themes that emerged through this study were consistent with Wiles’ (2017) work, as indicated by student discussions of the unique perspective of social work practice as an integral part of their professional identity. Students focused on the unique value base of social work, and the crossover between their personal and professional beliefs and values; they spoke of this in terms of internalization, as well as personal and professional reconciliation of the
mission and values of the social work profession. These elements were similarly congruent with Higgins (2016), who maintained that group identity develops though understanding and internalization of the unique elements of a profession. Students discussed internalization of certain elements specific to social work practice including: a holistic approach to practice, theory, skills, language, and the differing contexts of social work as part of professional identity, taking pride in discussing what makes the social work profession unique.

One of the unique elements of social work is the diversity of social work practice, with social workers working with various populations, in numerous settings at multiple levels of practice. Gilbert (1977), Higgins (2016), and Loseke et al., (1986), addressed the diverse nature of social work practice, noting, over time, how variations in practice have led to an inability on the part of society and of the social work profession to assist social workers in developing a cohesive social work identity. The impact of this diversity on professional identity was evident in student responses in this study. While students identified “baseline skills” needed for practice, referring to their education as generalist practitioners, as well as the unique perspective of social work, a disconnect between these baseline elements, and different practice settings emerged. When asked about ways to make the development of professional identity more explicit, students’ responses contradicted their identification of their development of professional identity as a generalist practitioner. Students identified learning experiences focusing on the unique aspects of each practice setting as essential in assisting a student in explicit development of professional identity, focusing on agency types rather than their work as a social work practitioner. This raises concern as to student identification as a generalist practitioner; are these ideas are due to their understanding or commitment to development as a generalist practitioner or, and an emerging understanding of the specialization existing in social work practice?
Within the context of social work education, students specifically discussed the importance of scaffolding learning experiences for professional identity development. This developmental process, driven by the competencies provided in the 2015 Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Educational, Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) was discussed essential in student development of professional identity, integrating knowledge, theory, skill, values and ethics. Tseng (2011) discussed professional identity development as a process, stating that educators must be intentional about the way that professional education experiences are organized. Professional identity is developed in stages, beginning with application of knowledge and skills, moving to understanding of professional in terms of own values and beliefs, as students finally learn to internalize these values and beliefs and assign personal meaning (Tseng, 2011). Student discussions supported Tseng’s process, and were supportive of developmental pedagogy within social work educational curricula.

Professional socialization has been defined as socialization of students to the norms, values and identity of a profession (Barretti, 2004). Barretti discussed socialization as a process, outlining six stages of socialization: expectation, refutation, negotiation, adaptation, and affirmation of their choice. While students did not explicitly discuss socialization in these terms, elements of this process were present throughout discussions. The socialization process was discussed by students as essential to the development of professional identity, particularly socialization through field education. Student discussions around field education focused on the benefits of practice experiences, as well as the importance of positive, supportive, relationships with field instructors. Self-assessment and reflection on practice experiences was particularly critical in professional identity development, consistent with findings of Ben Shlomo et al. (2012), and Ornstein and Moses (2010), who highlighted the importance of reflective
supervision, and a strong relationship between student and field instructor to ensure a meaningful field experience. Field education similarly allows for the development of a strong professional identity through experiences that challenge students’ early perceptions of social work practice, allowing them to address and reconcile any challenges to their perceptions through work with field instructors and faculty in the social work program.

Research has revealed that political and social contexts have a significant influence on the professional identity development of emerging social work professionals (Campanini et al., 2012; Higgins, 2016; Hill et al., 2017; Sha et al, 2012; Tseng, 2011). However, discussion of the impact of these contexts this was not addressed by students in this study, likely due to the internal focus of this study. However, the impact of social and political contexts, particularly in relation to social work education, is an area for continued research. The small sample size of this study prevents generalization. However, the focus group format lends itself to a robust discussion and development of a topic, far beyond individual data.

Findings related to scaffolding learning experiences supports the developmental pedagogy often used within social work education. Largely missing from students’ discussions was explicit discussion and identification of social work at micro, mezzo and macro levels of practice. Although students discussed being taught “so many different ways to help”, and clearly identified an understanding of policy as essential to social work practice, students did not discuss practice at multiple levels as an essential element of social work practice, or their social work professional identity. While this may be due to the limited time or focus of the study, this could be an indicator of lack of internalization of practice at multiple levels as part of professional identity. This is an area for further exploration, with implication for social work educator to continue to focus on and provide intentional development in all levels of practice. This study also
supports training for field instructors specifically on professional identity development to make the process of professional identity development explicit.

A strong professional identity is essential for social workers to ensure the proliferation and survival of the profession, and to provide legitimacy for the profession within the professional world, (Moorhead et al., 2014). Social work students provide us with a critical perspective on professional identity development, and the process of development, within the context of social work education must be made more explicit to ensure this development, enabling members of this professional to fulfill their mission in society.
References


Development of Professional Identity through Social Work Field Education

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Abstract

The development of professional identity in social work students is characterized by the internalization, of the mission, values, and skills of the profession. Literature examining the processes through which students develop professional identity in social work education is limited, particularly in relation to social work field education. To clarify how the elements of professional identity development are impacted by student experiences and learning in field education, this conceptual article examines current literature on the development of professional identity through the lens of symbolic interactionism; examining the ways that students process the symbols and interactions in field education as they create their identity as a social worker. Potential applications of these elements in development of field education curriculum for use by social work educators and field instructors are discussed to further the intentional development of professional identity in field education.

Keywords: professional identity, professionalism, symbolic interactionism, social work education, field education, signature pedagogy
Development of Professional Identity through Social Work Field Education

Professional identity is defined as the development and internalization of professional values, skills, norms, and behaviors for application in professional practice (Adams, Hean, Sturgis, & Macleod, 2006). Specific to social work practice, Bogo, Raphael, and Roberts (1993) define professional identity as not only adopting the values and beliefs of the profession, but also developing a commitment to the mission of social work as indicated by one’s willingness to work with and on behalf of disadvantaged populations for social justice. Loseke and Cahill (1986) discussed professional identity in terms of internalization and a shared identity: “they [social workers] must dramatically convince both others and themselves that they possess the expertise and the personal qualities that are the defining characteristics of occupational incumbents’ official image of themselves” (pp. 246, 247). Wiles (2013) conceptualized professional identity in three ways: characteristics that a social worker should possess, how students come to identify the profession, and how students “comes to identify themselves as a social worker” (p. 864). This conceptual paper explores current literature on the development of professional identity, using symbolic interactionism as the theoretical lens to examine how students develop and create a professional identity through symbols, meanings, social context, and reciprocal interactions for application in social work field education.

While studies exist addressing social work students’ understanding and perception of professional identity, many are dated, or focus solely on international social work programs (Levy, Ben Shlomo & Itzhaky, 2014; Loseke & Cahill, 1986; Sha, Wong, Lou, Pearson & Gu, 2012; Wiles, 2013). Other studies have focused on professional preferences of social work students in relation to preferred population, agency settings, and level of social work practice as measures of professional identity (Bogo et al., 1993; Sha et al., 2012; Weiss, Gal & Cnaan,
2015 Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), most noticeably in Competency One, which discusses the importance of ethical and professional behavior and understanding the values, roles, and mission of the profession (CSWE, 2015). Professional identity is addressed again in Educational Policy (EP) 2.2, Signature Pedagogy: Field Education. In this standard, Field Education is established as a mechanism of socialization “that teaches future practitioners the fundamental dimensions of professional work in their discipline to think, to perform, and to act ethically and with integrity” (CSWE, 2015, p. 12). While indicators such as values, professionalism and mission are not explicitly discussed as professional identity in the EPAS, these elements appear throughout and are congruent with indicators and definitions of professional identity presented in the literature, underscoring the importance of professional identity in the professional education of social workers.

The development of a professional identity is essential for social work students, as they understand and internalize the values, skills, norms and behaviors necessary for practice, and develop a commitment to the mission of social work (Adams et al., 2006; Loseke & Cahill, 1986). Literature focusing on the development of professional identity in field education is limited (Levy et al., 2014); little has been published over the past 3-5 years. However, analysis of existing literature allows for development and discussion of application of concepts in field education, particularly as related to the education and preparation of field instructors.

**Theoretical Framework**

Symbolic interactionism is a “micro-level theoretical framework and perspective in sociology that addresses how society is created and maintained through repeated interactions
among individuals” (Carter & Fuller, 2016, p. 932). Through interpretation of language and symbols gathered through these interactions, individuals assign meaning to their world, resulting in individual behavior (Carter & Fuller, 2016; Forte, 2004b; Stryker, 1987). Stryker (1987) focused on the development of roles and identity in society within the framework of symbolic interactionism, and maintained that individuals utilize social context and their perceptions of how others view them as they create their own identity, eventually internalizing these views as roles (Carter & Fuller, 2016; Stryker, 1987). Symbolic interactionism contains key assumptions about the creation of identity and self, and assumes a reciprocal exchange of symbols for communication to occur. Shared meanings are created through exchange of symbols, and meaning is a central causal aspect of human behavior (Forte, 2004b; Wiley, 2014). Symbolic interactionism assumes that symbols are interpreted utilizing individual cognitive processes during communication (Wagner, 1974; Wiley, 2014), and that individuals are active agents in constructing their own behavior (Stryker, 1987). Symbols are received not only from other individuals, but from an individual’s environment (including society), and society influences the behavior of individuals just as individuals do (Forte, 2004b; Stryker, 1987; Wagner, 1974). In transactions between person and environment, symbolic interactionism utilizes an ecological perspective as individuals engage in reciprocal exchanges with their environment (Dingwall, 2001), interactions between individuals and their environment creates shared meanings which results in behavior, and ultimately identity development (Carter & Fuller, 2016; Forte, 2004a; Stryker, 1987). While symbolic interactionism has been used as a theoretical lens in social work practice, Forte (2004b) discussed the limited application of symbolic interactionism in regards to social work education, with the notable exception of Knott’s (Knott, 1973, as cited in Forte, 2004b) work examining the professional socialization of social work graduate students as they
become social work instructors. The constructs and assumptions of symbolic interactionism serves as the theoretical lens of this writing, examining how students construct meaning and behavior through symbols, language, and reciprocal interactions as they develop their own professional identity within the context of social work field education.

**Literature Review**

Since the inception of the social work profession in the early 1900’s, social work has been challenged to establish a professional identity. Gilbert (1977) described the profession as experiencing the “Flexner syndrome” (pg. 402), citing Abraham Flexner’s 1915 speech arguing that social work was not a profession, rather an occupation serving to supplement the work of other professionals. Gilbert (1977) maintained that social work was “in search of a professional identity” (p. 401), noting that social work has had difficulty establishing a distinctive identity due to the diversity of social work practice, as well as the fact that social work largely utilizes theory and research from other professions. Additionally, social work does not have a specific area of practice, making it difficult even for social workers to articulate social work’s place within the helping professions (Gilbert, 1977; Loseke & Cahill, 1986). Over the years, social work has continued to be challenged with low professional status as compared to other professions; this difficulty has translated into social work education, as social work educators work to socialize students as professional social workers (Barretti, 2004; Gilbert, 1977; Levy, Ben Shlomo & Itzhaky, 2014; Loseke & Cahill, 1986).

**Development of Professional Identity through Professional Socialization**

Professional socialization is defined as socializing students to norms, values and identity of a profession (Barretti, 2004). “The emphasis in this process is upon the internalization of a professional identity and the values and attitudes that comprise it, rather than the mere
acquisition of knowledge and skills” (Becker, Geer, Hughes & Strauss, 1961, as cited in Weiss et al., 2004, pp. 14,15). While studies examining the development of professional identity are limited, research on the professional socialization process are more prevalent, and address aspects of professional identity development (Barretti, 2004). In a study of the process of professional socialization, Barretti (2004) interviewed undergraduate social work students; analysis of data led Barretti to conclude that students experienced six stages of socialization: expectation, refutation, negotiation, adaptation and eventual affirmation of their professional choice. This process, facilitated through professional social work education, requires students to learn to reconcile their personal experiences and expectations of the profession with the knowledge and experiences gained within the context of social work program. This includes integration and internalization of the norms and values of the profession, as well as navigating the reality of the profession as experienced in field education. Professional role models were found to significantly influence student socialization processes, and assisted in reconciling students’ choices for social work as a profession with the low status and lack of respect often experienced by the profession (Barretti, 2004).

The Development of Professional Identity in Social Work Education

While research has largely been focused on professional socialization, empirical research has been specifically devoted to examining the development of professional identity in the context of social work education. Loseke and Cahill (1986) examined undergraduate senior social work students’ perception and understanding of professional identity in contrast with the professional identity development of medical students. Study findings indicated a marked difference in the professionalization of social work students and medical students. Medical students experience the established prestige, authority, common definitions and identity of their
profession, while social work students experienced lack of respect and low status of the profession (Loseke & Cahill, 1986). Data gathered from social work students indicated a contradiction between their image and expectations of what it means to be a social worker, and the realities of the profession. Given the diverse roles that social workers occupy, there is a lack of definition and direction, or “commonly recognized symbols” (p. 255) within the social work profession, making it difficult for social work students to fully embrace or understand their identity as social workers (Loseke & Cahill, 1986).

In an examination of the professional identity development of students in Interprofessional educational (IPE) opportunities, Adams, Hean, Sturgis, and MacLeod Clark (2006) identified several elements necessary for the process of professional identity development. Their study explored the professional identity development of students from various medical professions (including social work as a medical profession). Social work students had the “weakest professional identity of the professional groups considered” (p. 61). The authors maintained that students must learn to reconcile their idealized notion of what it means to be a professional in their field, with the realities of practice. This reconciliation ideally occurs as students move through various experiences in their field education. Study findings indicated that students’ prior experiences had little effect on professional identity development. However, cognitive flexibility and gender were found to have significant influences on professional identity development (Adams et al., 2006). Research examining the professional preferences of social work students revealed additional concerns regarding the professional identity development of students, raising concerns that students were not internalizing the mission of the profession.
Professional Preferences as Indicators of Professional Identity

Professional identity has been examined in regards to student professional preferences as indicators of the development of social work professional identity in students. Studies examining professional preferences have raised concerns that students are failing to internalize the mission and values of social work (Bogo et al., 1993; Sha et al., 2012; Weiss et al., 2004). Bogo, Raphael, and Roberts (1993) examined the professional preferences of graduate level social work students. Professional preferences were measured through self-identification, preferences for level of social work practice, areas of practice, population preference, and preferred practice setting. Study findings were congruent with previous research; within the context of social work education, students were not developing a strong professional social work identity. While study findings indicated student preferences for work with vulnerable populations, which is consistent with the mission of social work, students preferred micro practice rather than mezzo and macro-level practice, and largely expressed desires to work as therapists or in private practice. The authors maintained that these preferences for micro-level, private practice were contradictory to the mission and values of the social work profession, and were indicators that students had not developed a strong social work professional identity (Bogo et al., 1993).

Sha, Wong, Lou, Pearson, & Gu (2012) examined the professional preferences of undergraduate and graduate social work students, finding that students largely preferred to work in clinical and therapeutic settings rather than engage in case management with families and individuals, group work, or community level work. Students similarly showed preferences for working in clinical or government settings, rather than non-profit settings. Weiss, Gal & Cnaan (2004) studied the impact of social work education on student professional preferences as an outcome of professional socialization and professional identity development. Data gathered from
students in three different programs over the course of their professional education indicated that student professional preferences did change over time; however, it was not social work programs that made a significant impact on students’ professional preferences for practice. Societal factors such as poor public perception of the profession, and job markets limiting employment choices for students were identified as major factors influencing student preferences (Weiss et al., 2004). While findings regarding the professional preferences of students in these studies were consistent with the work of Bogo et al., (2004), researchers in these studies concluded that student preferences for micro-level, therapeutic or clinical practice settings were less to do with lack of commitment to social work values and mission than failures on the part of social work education to properly socialize students to the profession, poor perception of the profession, and existing job markets (Sha et al., 2012; Weiss et al., 2004). The factors contributing to student professional preferences and choices have been explored in subsequent research on social work student professional identity, and are presented in the following section.

Factors Contributing to the Development of Professional Identity

Ben Shlomo, Levy, and Itzhaky (2012) utilized a person-in-environment perspective to examine the impact of systems within students’ environment on the development of professional identity in undergraduate social work students in Israel. Researchers examined the interaction between students and various elements within their environment to determine how these elements impacted the development of professional identity in undergraduate social work students. Researchers sought to measure the impact of “organizational resources, (satisfaction with supervision), personal resources (empathic concern, self-differentiation, and sense of coherence), and environmental resources (values)” (Ben Shlomo et al., p. 241) on the development of professional identity in social work students. Findings indicated that satisfaction
with supervision and student personal values directly impact the development of professional identity. The authors discussed implications for social work education, highlighting the importance of reflective developmental supervision in field education, as well as the need for social work education to be cognizant in curriculum development as to how all three of these elements impact students within the context of social work education (Ben Shlomo, Levy & Itzhaky, 2012).

Building on the findings of their previous study, Levy, Ben Shlomo, and Itzhaky (2014) examined the development of professional identity in undergraduate students. Researchers presented an extensive framework for measuring professional identity within the context of social work education. Using systems theory as their theoretical framework, researchers examined the influence of specific variables including satisfaction with supervision, self-differentiation and sense of coherence in conjunction with values and empathy as reported by students to measure the impact of these variables in various combinations on the development of professional identity. This study surveyed 160 undergraduate level social work students, finding that satisfaction with supervision in field education, as well as the development of personal/professional values and empathy within the context of their social work education positively impacted the development of professional identity in social work students, and should be considered in curriculum development (Levy, Ben Shlomo, Itzhaky, 2014).

Tseng (2011) examined the need for social work educators to understand the impact of current societal contexts in relation to socio-economic factors, technology, and generational influences, on student perceptions of their education, and on the development of professional identity. Tseng concluded that educators must recognize that the development of professional identity is a process, and must be cognizant of the way that courses and educational opportunities
such as field education are organized. Professional identity develops in stages; students begin their professional identity development with the application of knowledge and skills, they then move to understand their profession in terms of their own values and beliefs, finally progressing to assign “personal meaning and significance” (p. 373) in their understanding of their profession (2011). The literature exploring the development of professional identity in social work students through field education is limited; however, available studies highlight the importance of field education, specifically field instructors in this developmental process.

**Signature Pedagogy of Social Work Education**

Wayne, Bogo, and Raskin (2010) examined the importance of field education as the Signature Pedagogy of social work, highlighting the effectiveness of the field practicum in providing students with the opportunity to incorporate their critical thinking, ethical decision-making, and practice skills with content and theory in a practice setting. Through practice experiences in field education, students continue development of their values and professional identity as social workers. Although field education is highlighted as the Signature Pedagogy of social work education, no specific pedagogy or curricular standards are provided through the CSWE EPAS for field education or for the development of field instructors. The authors discussed the application of Shulman’s criteria for a signature pedagogy to maximize learning in field, and advocated for the development of curriculum and standards for field instructors (Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010).

Although current literature addresses aspects of field education as essential to the development of professional identity, limited research is available discussing the impact of field education on the process of professional identity development. Wong and Pearson (2007) examined social work field education as a mechanism for social work students in China to
develop professional identity. Despite the re-emergence of social work education programs in the 1980’s, social work educators in China have struggled to help students develop their identity as professional social workers. Limited professional employment opportunities for social workers, low professional status, and an unfavorable political environment hamper this development, and the authors argued that these factors have a significant impact on the development of professional identity in social work students. Researchers examined the impact of field education in reconciling the knowledge, skills and values gained in their social work education programs with these realities (Wong & Pearson, 2007). In a small qualitative study, students experienced growth in their professional identity as they integrated their field experiences with their academic experiences, under the mentorship of their field instructors, and with feedback from their peers. Researchers concluded that field education was essential for the continued development of professional identity in China, particularly as the realities of the political and practice arena may interfere with student development of professional identity (Wong & Pearson, 2007). The following section discusses the unique role of field education in student professional development, highlighting the contributions of field instructors in the development of social work student professional identity.

**The Role of Field Education in Student Development**

Field education was acknowledged by the social work profession as an essential piece of social work education before publication of the 2008 EPAS, when field education was identified as the signature pedagogy of social work education. Edith Abbott, founding member and faculty at the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago wrote extensively on the place of field education in the social work educational curriculum. Abbott stated that field education was the most important piece of a social work education program, assisting students in
the development of skill, integration of knowledge, and development of professional self (Abbott, 1915, as cited in Leighninger, 2000). In her writing, *Learning and Teaching in the Practice of Social Work*, Bertha Reynolds (1953) also discussed field education as essential for helping students integrate and apply knowledge and theory in practice settings, as well as develop their professional self. Reynolds maintained that field education and course work were parts of a whole, and should be treated as such in value and in consideration in curriculum development (Reynolds, 1953). Hortense Cochrane (1954) specifically addressed the role of field instructors in field education. Cochrane highlighted field instructors as essential in helping students develop professional identity, as well as process their experiences and emotions to facilitate learning and skill development (Cochrane, 1954).

Since the inception of formal social work education, curricular approaches to field education and for field instructor training have been explored. Levy (1965) presented a conceptual framework for training field instructors, highlighting the importance of supervision in social work field education. Field education “is a system of planned interaction between a teacher and a learner for the purpose of developing the learner’s competence” (Levy, 1965, p. 447). Levy maintained that field instructors must understand and intentionally distinguish the specific needs of students as different from that of agency social workers, and as such, supervision for a student in field education must be different from that of a professional social worker. Supervision activities in field education must focus on the development of skills, values, ethics, and perspectives, consistent with that of a professional social worker (Levy, 1965). To fully develop students as professional social workers, schools must separate and fully define each element as important. Similarly, focus must be on the development of each element in order to identify strengths and weaknesses. Focus on these different elements is essential in the
development of professional identity, as professional identity incorporates the skills, values, and mission of social work (Bogo et al., 1993). Additionally, field instructors must intentionally provide opportunities within a students’ placement to develop these elements. A positive, collaborative relationship between field instructor and student is identified as essential for a positive, meaningful learning field practicum experience (Levy, 1965).

**Essential role of the field instructor.** Ornstein and Moses (2010) utilized the concept of Goodness of Fit (Chess and Thomas, 1986, as cited in Ornstein & Moses, 2010) to underscore the complex and dynamic relationship between field instructors and students in field education. Using relational theory to highlight the reciprocal relationship between field instructors and their students, the authors maintained that both students and field instructors participate in the learning process rather than learning and supervision being a passive process. In a successful field practicum experience, the learning environment is co-created as students learn to understand their needs as an adult learner. Students must learn to receive and to give feedback to their field instructors regarding their needs. Similarly, field instructors learn to give and receive feedback, assess and determine their use of self, and help students address the anxieties and challenges inherent in social work practice. In this process, students develop skills, and a personal and professional sense of self, ultimately resulting in the development of professional identity as social workers (Ornstein & Moses, 2010).

Knight (2000) explored students’ perceptions of a successful field experience. Student evaluations of their field instructors over the course of field practicum were analyzed to identify supervisory skills identified as essential in engaging students in the field education process. The most effective field instructors were flexible in meeting students’ changing needs over the course of field education. Field instructors who clearly understood the purpose and mission of field
education, and who were able to convey this to students, were similarly reported as effective in engaging students in the learning process. Field instructors who engaged in collaborative, structured supervision, and who addressed students as individuals were also identified as providing positive learning experiences for students. Knight highlighted the importance of training for field instructors, as all social work practitioners are not inherently educators, and field instructors must be adequately prepared for this role (Knight, 2000).

Student and field instructor perceptions of student skill development and satisfaction with the field education experience were explored by Fortune, Lee and Cavazos (2007). Researchers explored the impact of repeated practice on skill development in field education, examining whether practice led to better performance, higher satisfaction with field education, and higher ratings of competence by field instructors. Participants were asked about the development of explicit social work skills such as communication and assessment, as well as skills such as self-assessment, and demonstrated understanding of the mission of social work. Students who repeatedly and intentionally practiced, rather than only reflecting, on their skills reported higher levels of satisfaction with their field placements, and rated themselves as more proficient in these areas. Similarly, field instructors who provided opportunities for students to repeatedly practice skills, and integrated evaluation on practice into supervision rated students as more competent. From these findings, researchers developed a framework for field instructors, incorporating repeated practice in the global outcome areas established in the study, focusing on areas where the student was determined to be weak. In addition, the study reinforced the importance of the relationship between the student and field instructor, stressing “related input and guidance” (p. 257) in assessing strengths and weaknesses of the student, and providing focused feedback to students in their skill development (Fortune, Lee, & Cavazos, 2007).
Field Education is identified by the 2015 Council on Social Work Education EPAS as the culminating experience in social work education, providing a unique opportunity for students to utilize the knowledge, theory, and skills they have acquired in their course work in a practice setting for development as a practitioner. Field instructors are an essential part of this process; the following sections discuss applications of the elements and concepts from the literature on professional identity for field education, specifically as it relates to training and education of field instructors.

**Development of Professional Identity: Implications for Field Instructors**

Professional identity is the development and internalization of professional skills, values and mission of social work for application in practice (Adams et al., 2006; Bogo et al., 1993). Professional identity lies at the core of the social work profession; the development of professional identity requires students to be able to process and integrate the content, theory and experiences they receive throughout their education in creation of a professional identity.

In reviewing the literature on professional identity development, findings suggest professional identity development is often impacted by student experiences with low professional status and lack of respect for the social work profession. As students enter field education, they are confronted with these realities, and many experience difficulties reconciling this with their idealized perceptions of the profession (Adams et al., 2006; Barretti, 2004; Gilbert, 1977; Levy, Ben Shlomo & Itzhaky, 2014; Loseke & Cahill, 1986; Sha et al., 2012; Weiss et al., 2004). The symbols and messages they receive through interactions and relationships with other professionals, clients, and society often do not coincide with their beliefs about the profession (Loseke & Cahill, 1986). Similarly, social and political contexts have a significant impact on student professional identity development, impacting their preferences for
populations they serve, and agency settings in which they choose to work. Research indicates that the influence of these contexts result in students preferring to work in private practice settings with seemingly higher status rather than non-profit settings, or engage in micro-level focused practice rather than work at mezzo or macro levels of practice (Tseng, 2011; Sha et al., 2012; Wong & Pearson, 2007).

As the development of professional identity has been given little attention in social work educational curricula in the past, issues related to status, respect or other societal or political contexts are often not addressed, allowing negative student perceptions of the realities and status of the profession to interfere with a students’ ability to fully internalize the mission, values and ethics of social work. While students may be exposed to issues related to status and respect within the context of their classroom education, when students experience these issues in field education, they are often not explicitly addressed. Without attention, the realities of the practice world prevail, impacting student professional identity development. The process of professional identity development must be explicitly addressed in field education; this begins with the education of field instructors around the process of professional identity, and continues throughout field education when addressed within the context of the supervisory relationship between field instructor and student.

**Recommendations for field instructors**

**Explicit focus on professional identity development.** As students continue their professional identity development in field education, the process of professional identity development must be made explicit. Symbolic interactionism maintains the creation of identity is a product of one assigning meaning to symbols, interactions, and reciprocal relationships. Meaning is shaped by context, and how we process communication and symbols (Carter &
Field instructors must understand the symbols students are receiving in their field education practice environment, and work with students to reflect on and understand how their experiences influence their perceptions of the mission, and values of social work, and how this shapes the creation of their social work professional identity.

**Supervisory relationship.** As the field instructor/student relationship is the primary point for reflection and development in field education, professional identity should be explicitly addressed within the context of this relationship. Satisfaction with supervision and a positive, collaborative relationship between field instructor and student has been established in the social work literature as essential for success in field education (Bogo et al., 1993; Dettlaff & Dietz, 2004; Fortune et al., 2007; Knight, 2000; Levy, 1965; Ornstein & Moses, 2010). Ben Shlomo et al., (2012) identified a reflective supervisory process as essential in the development of professional identity. Supervision should facilitate exploration of students’ own thoughts and feelings around professional identity, allowing students to explore personal perceptions of their experiences and examine those that are contradictory to their previously held perceptions and values.

**Field instructor training.** Field instructors must be prepared to discuss and model collaboration and reflective practices, and incorporate elements of professional identity into supervision and their daily work with students. In social work education, elements of professional identity have been left mainly to areas of implicit curriculum, and as such, field instructors are not prepared to make this process explicit. Field instructors must be intentionally prepared to work with students around the development of professional identity. Dettlaff and Dietz (2004) exploration of field instructors’ perceptions of their own training needs found that
to fully prepare field instructors to work with students in the developmental context of field education, field instructors must be provided training and orientation on all aspects of field education. Field instructors must be educated on the mission and goals of field education, as well as program expectations for student learning. Curriculum should include information on the social work program curriculum, processes, assignments, field evaluation, expectations regarding supervision and program logistics. Field instructors also identified a positive, collaborative relationship between the student and field instructors as essential for success in field education, which indicated a need for field instructor training focused on relationship building and supervision as practitioners may not possess the teaching and supervision necessary for this developmental process. For field instructors to develop a vision for their students in field education and assist students in the development of a meaningful learning experience, they must be intentionally prepared to work with students through a training curriculum (Dettlaff & Dietz, 2004).

Dettlaff and Dietz’s (2004) findings support a training curriculum focused on building a reflective, collaborative supervisory relationship as well as including the elements and process of professional identity as essential for field instructors. The work of Fortune et al., (2007) and Knight (2000) supported the findings of Dettlaff and Dietz (2004) which maintained that field instructors must be provided with education focused on building a positive, collaborative, supervisory relationship with their students (Fortune et al., 2007; Knight, 2000). Educational curricula for field instructors must also include training on the mission of field education, highlighting the developmental nature of nature of field education in educating social workers (Dettlaff & Dietz, 2004).
Training for field instructors on professional identity development. To specifically address professional identity development, field instructors must receive training on how to address professional identity within the context of field education. Tseng (2011) maintained that students develop professional identity in stages; students begin their professional identity development with the application of knowledge and skills, then move to understand their profession in terms of their own values and beliefs, finally progressing to the development of personal definition and meaning of their profession. Incorporation of these stages into field instructor training, along with field instructor education on the influence of the political and social contexts that impact professional identity development provides a framework from which field instructors may address professional identity development process in their work with students (Tseng, 2011).

Conclusion

While discussions on the development of professional identity within the context of field education has been largely omitted from contemporary social work literature, focus on professional identity is essential for continued growth and multi-systemic impacts of the profession. Students create their professional identity as they process the symbols, language and interactions they experience within the context of social work education. Students who have internalized the skills, values and mission of the social work profession can navigate the challenging social and political contexts in society, and are prepared to serve at all levels of social work practice. The development of professional identity in field education is essential in social work education to prepare students to serve in a dynamic, multi-systemic profession, addressing the changing needs of our societies.
References


Development of Professional Identity through Social Work Field Education

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Abstract

The development of social work professional identity is characterized by internalization of the knowledge, skills, values, and mission of social work, and begins with and is shaped by the content, and interactions, as well as student experiences within the context of the social work education curricula. This Banded Dissertation comprising three products centers on the development of professional identity within undergraduate social work education. The first product is a qualitative study in which the author examined student perceptions of professional identity, student definitions and perceptions of how social work education shapes students’ professional identity. Findings showed that intentional development of professional identity is essential for social work education; as such, field education has a significant role in professional identity development. The second product is a conceptual paper focusing on professional identity development in the context of field education. Utilizing symbolic interactionism as a theoretical framework, the paper examined factors affecting student professional identity development within the context of social work field education and discusses implications for field instructors and field education curricula. The third product is a presentation of product 2 at the Council on Social Work Education’s 63rd Annual Program Meeting in October of 2017. This presentation outlined current research on professional identity development through the lens of symbolic interactionism, focusing on field education. The three products of this Banded Dissertation emphasize professional identity development as an essential function of social work education. This work has implications for social work educators seeking to develop curricula to assist students in their development of a strong professional identity.

Keywords: professional identity, professionalism, symbolic interactionism, social work education, field education, signature pedagogy
Presentation Abstract

The development of professional identity in social work students is characterized by internalization of the mission, values, and skills of the profession. In this presentation, the author discussed current literature on professional identity development, focusing on social work field education, and the role of social work field instructors in the process. Implications for social work education were discussed, including explicit focus on identity development in curricula, and training for field instructors on the development of professional identity within field education. Inserted below are annotated PowerPoint slides of the presentation.
The author presented this work titled the *Development of Professional Identity through Social Work Field Education* at the Council on Social Work Education 63rd Annual Program Meeting (APM) in Dallas, Texas on October 20, 2017. The Conference provided an opportunity to present the paper written for product 2 of this Banded Dissertation - professional identity development in field education using the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism. Current literature was outlined, and implications for field education were discussed. The author paid specific attention to the role of field instructors on the process of identity development. Each slide is numbered in the order of the presentation, followed by the original slide presented at the Conference, and a brief descriptive text summarizing the content thereof.

Slide 1

This is the cover page for this author’s presentation at the Council on Social Work Education 63rd Annual Program Meeting. This slide lists the title, and presenter’s contact information.
Three learning objectives guided the presentation, with a focus on implications for the development of professional identity within the context of social work field education.
Professional identity is characterized as the development and internalization of professional values, skills, norms, and behaviors for application in professional practice (Adams, Hean, Sturgis, & Macleod, 2006). Social work professional identity is characterized by the development of a commitment to the mission of social work, (Bogo, Raphael, & Roberts, 1993) and is developed through internalization of shared identity, incorporating the unique aspects of the profession (Loseke & Cahill; Wiles, 2013).
The process of professional identity as outlined by Tseng (2011). Professional identity development begins with acquisition of knowledge and skills, moving to understanding in terms of one’s own terms and beliefs, then assigning meaning and significance. This process must be taken into account and incorporated into social work education curricula.
Professional identity development may be viewed through the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism posits that identity is developed through the language and symbols received through interactions in their environments. Individuals assign meaning to these symbols, creating their own identity (Carter & Fuller, 2016; Forte, 2004; Stryker, 1987).
Current research has explored barriers to professional identity development, primarily through professional identity as indicated by student professional preferences. Student preferences indicated preferences for micro settings, and work in clinical or government agencies (Bogo et al., 1993; Sha, Wong, Lou, Pearson, & Gu, 2012; Weiss, 2004).
Professional identity development is impacted by political and social contexts, including low professional status, sometimes poor public perception, which conflict with often idealized notion of the perception. In addition, the diversity of social work practice, and lack of clarity in regards to the role of social work in society creates additional barriers (Loseke & Cahill, 1986).
A successful field experience is characterized by flexible learning environments, repeated practice for skill development, collaborative supervision, and a strong relationship between field instructor and student with focused feedback. Field instructors must also understand and support the mission and developmental nature of field education (Fortune, Lee, & Cavazos, 2007; Knight, 2000).
Field instructor is essential to a successful field placement. A collaborative relationship between field instructor and student in which a student must be able to give and receive feedback. Field instructors must help students develop skills, and understand personal and professional use of self in development of their professional identity.
Supervision is a formalized, collaborative process through which students develop skills, values, and ethics, internalizing the mission of social work practice (Levy, 1965). Collaborative relationships are focused on learning, and acknowledge the developmental nature of field education; making this supervisory relationship different from that of an employee.
The process of professional identity development must be made explicit, particularly in field education. Field instructors must collaborate with students to understand how their experiences influence their perceptions of the mission and values of social work.
Professional identity development must be intentionally included as part of the field education curriculum. As students process the symbols, language and interactions they experience in field education, they continue to build their identity. Field instructors must assist students in processing these symbols. Curricula should include training for field instructors to make this process explicit.
Students who have internalized the skills, values and mission of the social work profession, can navigate the challenging social and political contexts in society, and are prepared to serve at all levels of practice.

This slide serves as a conclusion to the presentation; a summary statement stressing the importance of the development of a strong social work professional identity.
References


References


References

