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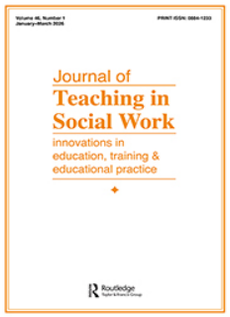

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"Being a Person, Not Just a Function" – Teaching Professional Knowledge within Social Work Education

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ABSTRACT

How social work students develop professional knowledge is seldom discussed or studied. The aim of this study is to explore what professional knowledge in social work is, and when and how it can be stimulated through educational practices. The methodology used was World Café workshops; one with teachers in Sweden, one with teachers in Ireland, and one with Swedish social work students in the last semester of their education. The results are based on an analysis of the notes from the teachers and students who participated in the workshops. Professional knowledge in educational practice is interpreted as consisting of four main themes: Developing and maintaining relationships; Creating engagement in learning situations; A lifelong learning process; and Responsiveness to others and self. The results from the workshops show that professional knowledge can be stimulated in social work education using various pedagogical tools involving relational teaching and qualitative meetings with students. The teachers in the study highlight challenges impacting these teaching practices; these include large student groups and increasing administrative burdens that reduce their time for students and for learning collaboratively with colleagues and others. The teachers wanted to include professional knowledge at all educational levels including doctoral theses in social work.

KEYWORDS

Social work education; teaching practice; professional knowledge; phronesis; practice-based wisdom

Introduction

Developing an understanding of what social work means in practice can be a challenge for students as well as teachers, particularly if they do not have experience of social work practice. This article reflects the authors' interest in providing professional knowledge to social work students. A study by Welander et al. (2020) with newly graduated Swedish social work students found a need for a more practically oriented social work education that prepared students for challenges in their future professional role. Mooney et al. (2023) suggest that pathways into the

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profession of social work are impacted with worries about how much education costs, how the public perceives social work, and by so many recent graduated social workers experiencing stress and burnout. A poor understanding of the professional social work role could also be a reason for students' failure on their educational path in their obligatory social work placement (Roulston et al., 2018).

It has also been claimed that, to meet the demands of social work practice, relational educating practices are a necessity (Nordesjö et al., 2022; Rawles, 2016; Wang, 2012). Relational educating and learning create a safer environment in which students can increase their capacity and tolerance for the demands of contemporary social work practice (Cleak et al., 2023). Relational educating also fosters students' personal development in the sphere of self-with-others (Edwards & Richards, 2002). From a social work perspective, authenticity in the professional relationship between teacher and student is understood as the foundation for learning (Rawles, 2016). Dialogic communication, in which the focus is not on consensus but rather on listening to and learning with and from others, promotes understanding and broadens participants'/students' perspectives. Students (and teachers) need to be able to listen to others, but to do this you also need to be able to listen to yourself. Allowing all voices to be heard can make multiple interpretations possible (Arnkil & Seikkula, 2015; Seikkula et al., 2018).

Social work practice and teaching practices in academia are framed by organizational demands and restrictions, which may challenge professional development and the social work profession's humanistic beliefs (Halton et al., 2013). Relational social work and teaching practices may clash with the bureaucratic nature of social service agencies and academia, as well as the growing marketization of society in general and of the welfare state in particular. The influence of New Public Management (NPM) has contributed to the development of an organizational professionalism whereby the influence of relational social work is reduced (Hingley-Jones & Ruch, 2016; Nordesjö et al., 2022). NPM's influence also includes a focus on administrative work and documentation, so-called "empaperment" that emphasizes general aspects rather than professional knowledge that is situated, specific, and unique (Bornemark, 2018, 2020).

Aims

Based on teachers' and students' experiences with social work education, this study aims to investigate what professional knowledge in social work is, and when and how it might be stimulated by educational practices.

Theoretical perspectives on knowledge

In this section, we will present theoretical concepts that have guided us in our interpretations of what professional knowledge is. According to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, episteme, techne, and phronesis are different forms of knowledge (Aristoteles, 1988; Birmingham, 2004). Episteme can be interpreted as theoretical knowledge, for example knowledge of the law or theories on human behavior that students can acquire. Techne can be understood as practical know-how, craft or craft knowledge, such as knowing how to perform specific administrative procedures when undertaking a child welfare investigation or assessment. Phronesis has been described as practical wisdom (Thompson & West, 2013), "a state of grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about what is good or bad for a human being" (Aristotle quoted in Birmingham, 2004, p. 314).

Phronesis is situated knowledge, a sensibility for how things should be done in often ambiguous and complex situations (Bornemark, 2020). The knowing and thinking that phronesis calls for are primarily concerned with the particulars of the situation and have shown to be a particularly significant component of professional knowledge in the field of social work (Birmingham, 2004). Phronesis is connected to action: deciding to act with sensitivity in every situation. van Manen (1991) uses the concept *pedagogical tact*, which according to Birmingham (2004) resembles the virtue of phronesis. "To exercise tact means to *see* a situation calling for sensitivity, to *understand* the meaning of what is seen, to *sense the significance* of this situation, and to actually *do* something right" (van Manen, 1991, p. 146, quoted in Birmingham, 2004, p. 317). Swedish philosopher Jonna Bornemark (2020) concludes that professional judgment (as part of phronesis) also involves being able to stay "pactive"; that is, being attentive and ready to act with tact and timing. Phronesis is also connected to virtue, and according to Aristotle, a way to become virtuous is to imitate a virtuous person (Birmingham, 2004, p. 317) – that is, a role model, which most people need in life, education, and social work practice.

Empirical contexts

Sweden

Sweden has traditionally been characterized as operating under the social democratic welfare model, or the Nordic model of welfare (Esping-Andersen, 1990), in which the state is responsible for the organization of social work initiatives and the employment of social workers. Most social work students in Sweden complete their practice training, their field education, in a public organization within a certain municipality or in the region that shares the responsibility for healthcare with that municipality. Since

the late 1970s, social work has developed as an academic field in the Swedish educational system, with a three-and-a-half-year curriculum. Swedish social work students spend at least 20 weeks full time in placement, approximately 800 hours, either in one block or divided into two 10-week periods. Sweden has ten and a half million inhabitants, and over the last 25 years the number of social work professionals has doubled from 20,000 to 40,000 (Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, SALAR, 2024).

Ireland

Ireland, on the other hand, could be categorized as operating under a liberal welfare model (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Nygård, 2020), whereby many social workers are employed by public agencies. Ireland has 5.3 million inhabitants. A particular challenge for social work education there is to find organizations to provide social work practice placements (Mooney et al., 2023; Murphy et al., 2023). Opportunities for professional social work in Ireland began to grow in the 1970s when the influence of the Catholic Church waned in the context of the welfare state (Halton et al., 2013); the 1990s saw a rise in the prominence of neoliberalism (Brockmann & Garrett, 2022). Although the number of social workers there has significantly increased, with 5,851 registered by the Social Workers Registration Board as of October 2025, compared to 2,237 in 2005 (Halton et al., 2013), this remains far lower than what is needed (O'Meara & Kelleher, 2022; Whiting et al., 2023). Social work education and practice in Ireland is subject to accreditation standards (Social Workers Registration Board [SWRB], 2019). Every social work program must ensure that each student completes 1,000 hours of placement, 350 of which must be in one block and full time.

Method – data collection

To gather knowledge about the situation of professional knowledge in social work education, workshops were held with teachers in Sweden (A), social work students in Sweden (B), and teachers in Ireland (C). The Swedish teachers were invited to a workshop during a national conference in social work in Stockholm (2023). The idea for the workshop was inspired by the World Café method (Turunen, 2013), which is used in community work to stimulate dialogue and collective learning. The method, with its roots in social work organizations in the US, is used to support participants in creating shared meaning through dialogue. Sharing experiences and knowledge – "cross-fertilizing" – brings different perspectives together and stimulates participants' collective reflections to create new insights (Turunen, 2013).

Methodological approach and sample

Participants in the first workshop comprised 12 teachers in social work programs from six universities in Sweden. The teachers were divided into four groups by counting one, two, three, four, so that the groups were distributed independently of the participants' own choice. Four tables were provided, each with one question related to professional knowledge. The question for the first table was: What is professional knowledge? For the second one, it was: When should professional knowledge be part of education? And for the third: How is professional knowledge taught in education? For the fourth table, participants were asked to share creative ideas for how to further develop professional knowledge in education.

On each table was a notepad for the group to make notes on. Each group started by discussing their table's question, and one person in the group was asked to make notes to summarize the discussion. After 15 minutes of discussion, the group changed tables, and thus also the question to address. At the next table, they began by reading what the previous group had written on the notepad and filled in with their ideas, thoughts, and experiences: their instruction was to read the notes made by the previous participants and add their own reflections, including new aspects if they felt something was missing. During the workshop, the groups circulated and changed tables four times, which means that by the end of the workshop they had all discussed all four questions.

As a second step, Irish teachers in social work were asked to contribute to the results from the Swedish teachers' workshop by reading and discussing each of the four questions. The Irish teachers reflected on each question after having read the Swedish teachers' notes and contributed perspectives that they felt were missing or had been less developed by the Swedish teachers.

As a third step, a similar workshop was held with Swedish social work students (numbering approximately 50). The students received the same questions as the teachers had, with one exception: One question was added to explore the student perspective on learning. They were asked: When and how do you learn professional knowledge? The purpose of the three workshops was to extend the number of reflections on professional knowledge from somewhat different angles – collecting, if possible, broader perspectives on teaching and learning professional knowledge.

Analysis of the data

We did not record the discussions among the participants during the workshops; instead, the empirical data consists of the notes they made on the notepads. The notes from each World Café workshop were analyzed in three steps. The first step was to read all the answers on

Table 1. Results of the condensed meaning analysis of answers from workshops with social work teachers in Sweden and Ireland to the question *What is professional knowledge in social work?*

Subcategories based on a condensed meaning analysis of the notes	Citations from notes from workshop participants on the different dimensions of professional knowledge
Relationship-based practice	Being a person, not just a function
Situational-based wisdom	Practical wisdom that is carried out with professional judgment in situation-specific contexts on individual/group/structural levels
Handle complex matters	Being able to handle complex matters and see different perspectives and flex in-between
Allow all voices	Self-awareness and dialogical learning in which all voices are allowed to contribute
Emancipatory work	Using emancipatory social work to create, build, and maintain relationships
Theoretical aspects	Professional knowledge also means having acquired theoretical knowledge such as psychology, sociology, law, social policy, and a critical interjection of these.
	Irish complementary contributions
Combine care and responsibilities	Ability to manage care versus control responsibilities and functions; Holding the voice of the service user as critical in all interventions
Use self-awareness and critical thinking	Understanding our own psychological make-up and family history, self-awareness, and thinking critically
Act as user's navigator in complex welfare systems	Prompts the use of self and an awareness that social workers are not just state agents but also serve as a buffer, which helps to make sense of complex systems and experiences that service users have to navigate
Promote self-determination in the face of risk	Includes critical reflection and a capacity to promote autonomy/self-determination in the face of risk; Recognizing one's limits and role, in which there is a statutory function

the notepads under each question, and the second was to analyze these answers by extracting core elements in them through the method of condensation of meaning (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). Tables 1–4 show the condensation of meaning of the notes made by the Swedish and Irish teachers in answer to each of the four questions they discussed during the workshops. Table 5 shows the condensation of meaning of the notes from the workshop held with the students in answer to the question: When and how do you learn professional knowledge? In the process of interpreting the notes and condensing them according to their meaning, we tried to stay as close as possible to the wording used in the original notes. In the final step of the analysis, categories that resembled each other were merged; these form the subcategories that are presented in Tables 1–5.

The teachers' perspectives are described in Tables 1–4, including notes from both teachers' workshops (A and C). The fifth and last table presents the Swedish students' perspectives on when the learning of professional knowledge might take place during educational practices, which is the only part of the students' workshop (B) that is presented. The notes from the workshops were analyzed through condensation of meaning (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008) and were further condensed into subcategories by the first author, who was also the leader of the three workshops.

Methodological and ethical considerations

The professional knowledge workshop was one of the several options open to social work teachers attending the social work conference. Participation was thus voluntary and intentional, indicating that they had a particular interest in the topic of professional knowledge. Two Irish social work teachers with a particular interest in the subject participated in the World Café workshop and further developed the Swedish teachers' discussions. Of course, we would have appreciated it if more Irish teachers had been able to participate in this second step of the workshop for teachers, but this was unfortunately not possible due to lack of time.

The students who participated were in their last semester of education. During their last year of education, they have already had their placements and most of them also work part time, so they recognize and can relate to the topic of professional knowledge in both education and social work practice. The results from the students' workshop (B) were made available to the students who had participated in the workshop during class, and they were asked if their answers to the question: When and how do you learn professional knowledge? could be used as part of a teacher discussion and/or for possible publication in a scientific journal. They consented to contribute their perspective on learning professional knowledge within social work education.

Results of the analysis of the workshop notes

We will discuss our analysis of the findings in the following sections, including what professional knowledge consists of and when and how it can be taught.

What is professional knowledge?

In answer to the first question (see Table 1): What is professional knowledge?, the teachers defined it as a personal competence in which you need to use your acquired theoretical knowledge and know-how of the welfare system to handle complex and difficult/uncertain situations. An example of this is reflected in the following note from the workshop: "*Practical wisdom that is carried out with professional judgment in situation-specific contexts . . .* " (See Table 1). Thus, the workshop participants described professional knowledge as something that can be interpreted as containing all three of Aristoteles (1988) elements of knowledge (episteme, techne, and phronesis), but with an emphasis on phronetic knowledge as professional knowledge was considered to entail judgment in a specific context (cf. Bornemark, 2020; Thompson & West, 2013). The emphasis on practical wisdom is also related to challenges in social work, exemplified in the following quotes: "*Being able to handle complex matters and see different perspectives and flex in-between these different*

perspectives" and "*. . . promote autonomy/self-determination in the face of risk*" (See Table 1). A capability for relationship-building is also highlighted as an important aspect of professional knowledge, which is reflected in the following quote: "*Ability to manage care versus control responsibilities and functions*" and "*Holding the voice of the service user as critical in all interventions*" (See Table 1). The situational-based practical wisdom is thus also connected to creating relationships with the people who use social work services using wholeheartedness, open-mindedness, and responsibility, as suggested by Birmingham (2004).

Fundamental aspects of professional knowledge identified by the Swedish teachers involved being present with yourself as a person, which they described as the importance of "*being a person, not just a function*" (See Table 1). We interpret being a person rather than a function as an ability to relate to others in a way that is personal without going too far beyond the boundaries of the private sphere. This is related to self-awareness, and for this you need an ability to be open toward others but still have a distinct self in your relations with them (cf. Edwards & Richards, 2002; Halton et al., 2023; Wang, 2012). The teachers also emphasized *the need for critical reflections* and included what might be defined as more immersed professional skills, such as *advocating for people accessing complex welfare systems* and *promoting self-determination in the face of risk* (see Table 1). Here, critical reflections on what needs and rights the service user has are based on strengthening their reflective thinking and helping them articulate their needs and the specificity of the situation (cf. Birmingham, 2004). According to the teachers, professional knowledge is comparable to *situational-based wisdom*, which includes episteme (theoretical knowledge) and techne (craftmanship) as well as self-awareness in combination with professional judgment (cf. Bornemark, 2020).

Relationship-oriented teaching practices

The teachers' answers to the second question (see Table 2): How can professional knowledge be taught? reflected the notion that it is connected to *forming relationships such as being a member of a group in which relational collective learning can take place over time* (see Table 2). Another quote from the workshop notes involved *stage-managing situations in teaching in which dialogic processes from different contexts are made visible*. We interpret this as teaching practices that facilitate systemic understandings among students. The notes also included *developing confidence through peer learning and focusing on more collaboration between practice and academia* (see Table 2). The teachers discussed the importance of using different materials and contexts, including engaging with literature and research findings and not forgetting changes that can occur in a person's life course. *Finding role models within social work* was also highlighted as important for learning professional knowledge, as was *the ability to maintain relationships over time*. Teaching skills involving creating and

Table 2. Results of the condensed meaning analysis of answers from workshops with social work teachers in Sweden and Ireland to the question *How is professional knowledge taught in education?*

Subcategories based on a condensed meaning analysis of the notes	Citations from notes from workshop participants on the topic of how professional knowledge can be taught in social work education
Through prolonged self-other situations	Challenge students to reflect on themselves and others through being a member of a cohesive group.
Maintain relationships with students	Establish and maintain relationships with current and former students.
Through role models and mentorship	Offer role models and preferably mentorship with professionals who have agreed to be "one to learn from."
Through commitment and inspiration	Use methods in teaching that engage, include, and inspire the students.
Include different materials and contexts	Use practice, literature, fiction, film, case descriptions, and simulation environments.
Integrate a systemic perspective	Have students use systemic theory and processes that might extend across and between people in a family, the social service agency, a work group, the classroom …
	Irish complementary contributions
Develop confidence through peer learning	Peer learning through organized practice skill training in safe environments that develops confidence
Collaboration between practice and academy	Commitment to the integration of theory/practice through a dynamic commitment of collaboration between academic teachers and practice teachers
Engage with literature and research findings, consider life course changes	Engaging with the literature and research, ensuring that students use material that is evidence-based; Keeping in mind the importance of an application across the life course

maintaining relationships is a relationship-oriented skill that social work students need to develop, a craftsmanship that can be seen as encompassing both techne and phronesis (Edwards & Richards, 2002).

Professional knowledge is lifelong learning

Answers to the third question (see Table 3): When during education should professional knowledge be taught?, emphasize that this type of knowledge is a continuous process. The teachers' notes stressed the need to *include different forms of practical exercises* to promote students' development of professional knowledge in every part of their education. The notes also highlighted the importance of lifelong learning in social work as part of *developing oneself and the profession* (see Table 3). Previous research also stresses the importance of fostering professional development right from the start of education, including encouraging students to engage with the trade union and in practice research (cf. Doyle et al., 2023; Garrett, 2022).

The Irish teachers particularly emphasized a need to *upgrade placements as a crucial part of social work education*. In Ireland, the professional standards set by the Social Workers Registration Board (2019), are used to assess students in their placement; this highlights the significance of practice reflection for social work students in developing their professional practice. Field placement is also an important part of social work education in Sweden, where craftsmanship (techne) as well

Table 3. Results of the condensed meaning analysis of answers from workshops with social work teachers in Sweden and Ireland to the question *When should professional knowledge be part of the education?*

Subcategories based on a condensed meaning analysis of the notes	Citations from notes from workshop participants on the topic of when professional knowledge should be learned during education
Lifelong Learning	Professional knowledge needs to be developed continuously from the beginning of the education and last throughout the study period and preferably never stop!
Mandatory during and after education	Mandatory during the social work education and followed up during times of employment
Postgraduate education	Be included in master's and doctoral education
In placements and as trainees	Preserve placement during the social work education; Include trainees . . . in alumni activities after the education.
Continuous training	Professional knowledge is a combination of theoretical and practical knowledge that should be seen as a whole throughout the social work education.
	Irish complementary contributions
Foster commitment to professional development	Should be an integrated part of programs from the start; Important to foster, from the beginning, a commitment to ongoing continued professional development (CPD)
Engage students in trade unions	Make students aware of the purpose/function of professional bodies and their educational role (IASW*).
Engage in practice research	Encourage and support students and qualified practitioners to engage in practice research to inform practice; Promote and develop research-informed practice that will inform professional training.
Upgrade the importance of placement	Practice placement is as important as a site of professional development and learning as the classroom is.

*Irish Association of Social Workers.

Table 4. Results of the condensed meaning analysis of answers from workshops with social work teachers in Sweden and Ireland to the prompt *Share creative ideas regarding how to further develop professional knowledge in education.*

Subcategories based on a condensed meaning analysis of the notes	Citations from notes from workshop participants on the topic of creative ideas and suggestions for further stimulating the development of professional knowledge in education
Action-oriented methods	Use mobilization methods such as Open Space, PhotoVoice, and computer simulation.
Anchored emotional knowledge	Use more senses; cultural expressions such as film, painting, creative arts, music; sports, nature, and animals.
Network with former students	Alumni students networking with current students
Learning examinations	Develop learning examinations that include practical parts.
Link social work to society	Find "living projects" and highlight current events in society; Focus on links between social work and wider questions of sustainability.
	Irish complementary contributions
Work directly with children	Experimental learning with different materials in developing skills of practicing with children outside the social work area; Use of exhibitions to prompt discussions on the meaning of families
Link to vulnerable groups with digital tools	Use of technology to engage with vulnerable groups who may otherwise be reluctant to engage, e.g. young people with mental health issues.
Find students' confidence	Encourage students to evaluate and investigate areas they are passionate about.

as practical wisdom, or phronetic knowledge, connected to social work practice can be transferred. Social workers who students meet in their field placements can be important role models for them in developing their professional knowledge.

Table 5. Results of the condensed meaning analysis of answers from workshops with Swedish social work students to the question *When and how do you learn professional knowledge?*

Subcategories based on a condensed meaning analysis of the notes	Citations from notes from workshop participants on the topic of how one develops professional knowledge as a student
Be a knowledge seeker	In lectures, literature, theories, and courses as well as seeking knowledge about the profession
Through role models and willingness to learn	From case reviews and in model learning; being responsive and receptive to constructive criticism from colleagues
Interactions in and observation of social work	Interaction and observation of conversations as well as in collaboration between different organizations and professions
Challenge yourself	Curiosity, interest, ambition, and a willingness to develop and challenge oneself
Self-awareness and knowledge of social problems	Self-knowledge and life experience as well as experiences of one's own and/or others' social problems and life difficulties
Think outside the box	Critical reflections: ask difficult questions and dare to think outside the box and be flexible.
Practice gives skills	Practice documentation and routines in social work – learn from lived experience of difficult situations.
Learn from one's own and others' mistakes	Learn from their own and others' mistakes (legal cases) as well as via the media: documentaries, podcasts, news.

Engagement and relational teaching as part of professional knowledge

The fourth question (see Table 4) was the part of the workshop in which participants were asked to: Share creative ideas and suggestions for how to further stimulate the development of professional knowledge within the educational context (see Table 4). Here the importance of commitment, involvement, and empowerment, as well as more contact with different fields of social work, was emphasized. Examples that were given in the notes included *engaging alumni students* (see Table 4), which is a common practice internationally (Maidment, 2006 in Short et al., 2023). The teachers also advocated using more tangible techniques, meaning those that *include multiple senses*, as well as *conducting action-oriented assessments* (see Table 4). They also emphasized the importance of working with "real situations" and people's current life circumstances, which are based on lived experience. In addition, the Swedish teachers also stressed that there is a *need for practice-based master's programs*, which are not found in Sweden today except for a specialization in healthcare social work.

Commitment from teachers as well as students seems to be the most important aspect for developing professional knowledge within social work education. The teachers underlined the importance of *using students' own interests to engage them in their social work education concerning, for example, environmental sustainability and sports*. A successful example of a work-integrated learning innovation project extended the reach of the classroom into practice (Rose et al., 2024). Included in this project was the engagement of Irish students in a transnational student-led research project with Australian social work students, the two groups together researching social work competency in disaster management while on placement. The topic was chosen by student participants, and their findings demonstrate how social work

education can benefit emerging social workers by helping them gain the competencies they need to operate in disaster-affected rural communities through resilience-building (Doyle et al., 2023).

Being responsive and knowledge-seeking

Teachers and students (see Table 5) agreed regarding *the importance of relational-based skills* as one of the main sources for accomplishing the different tasks of social work. The Swedish students who attended the workshop highlighted the importance of being a knowledge-seeker. They also cited responsiveness as part of the right "mindset" of a social worker, exemplified in the notes as *being responsive and receptive to constructive criticism from colleagues*; and *learn [ing] from one's own and others' mistakes* (see Table 5).

The students emphasized that *to acquire professional knowledge you need to be willing to challenge yourself*. Another aspect put forward was having courage, expressed in the notes as *being able to cultivate self-courage and dare to ask difficult questions*. All the aspects mentioned above can be interpreted as character traits that are essential for the development of practical wisdom; i.e., phronesis. The answers also show that the students (who were in the seventh and last semester of their education) are aware of the importance of this type of professional knowledge. They also underlined the importance of *being involved in or having the opportunity to observe social work as sources for developing professional knowledge*. Another answer from the notes involved *learning from mistakes, your own and/or others'*, which students may experience in practice during placement for field training, and/or through media from reported personal lived experiences. The students also said they value *learning by doing* through conducting social work together with others who are more experienced in social work practice. *Finding role models and establishing relationships* with them were highlighted as sources of inspiration.

Discussion

Our study highlights the importance of students' and teachers' own relational, theoretical, and practical engagement in social work, which according to the results of the workshops has a major influence on the development of one's professional knowledge. Professional knowledge can be taught in educational practices, through self-other situations, through maintaining relationships and encouraging the use of role models throughout one's professional life. However, acquiring professional knowledge is a continuous, lifelong learning process that involves ongoing continuous professional development. According to the students, being receptive to others is essential for learning opportunities pertaining to professional expertise. They especially value practice-based learning opportunities encountered in field placements and in the

university setting. According to the students, lessons learned from one's own and others' mistakes in challenging circumstances are valuable life experiences that can be translated into professional knowledge.

Developing and maintaining relationships

Relational social work is an essential element of professional knowledge, and as argued by Edwards and Richards (2002), relational teaching is carried out through mutual engagement from students and teachers. Through relational teaching practices, students can be taught how to create less hierarchical relationships (Ruch, 2005), which is a relationship-oriented skill that is needed in order to empower people. Relationships that are totally nonhierarchical cannot exist between teachers and students in academia or between social workers and people who use services. These relationships will always be affected by the power connected to holding different positions in the hierarchal structure of the educational system or society. However, teaching practices such as pedagogical tact (van Manen, 1991, quoted in Birmingham, 2004) can be used to mitigate power imbalances in the teaching context. Pedagogical tact also applies to practice teaching. According to O'Brien et al. (2023), the teacher needs to reconfigure the focus in the learning situation toward shared relational connections rather than case management. Putting O'Brien's suggestion in the academic context, the teacher needs to focus on the student's personal and professional development and the possibilities for learning within a group dynamic rather than just the course subject.

A lifelong learning process

Professional knowledge requires a lifelong learning process, which was highlighted by the teachers and the students who participated in the workshops. Developing professional knowledge means learning how to use and combine acquired theoretical and practical knowledge (episteme and techne) and use it in a way that is attuned to the situation you are in and the people you meet (phronesis). Developing professional knowledge is challenging, and requires a learning process in which students are trained in relating to both self and others. Teaching practices that support critical reflection in the sphere of "me with others" give students opportunities to explore the conditions and content of social work through an integration of knowledge, a process that needs to be continued throughout one's life within the context of continual professional development (Braye et al., 2007; Rawles, 2016). According to students', teachers', and employers' perspectives on what needs to be enhanced in social work education, the

lifelong learning perspective also includes upgrading field placements to be an equally important element of education (O'Meara, 2024; O'Meara & Kelleher, 2022; SALAR, 2024). Students, however, might need preplacement preparation within the university setting before engaging in social work placement practice. Findings of a national survey in Ireland that examined enablers of and barriers to the social work practice teacher role suggest that, before placement, students should receive more training to prepare them for the realities of social work practice environments (Murphy et al., 2023).

Creating engagement in learning situations

Teaching practices also need to promote the co-creation of knowledge with students. Mutual engagement by teachers and students is crucial for the co-creation of knowledge, which was highlighted by the workshop participants. Student engagement can be supported by including practical and relational aspects in every learning situation. As a teacher in social work, it is vital to reflect on whether the teaching practices that one uses will contribute to new experiences and learning for both parties, the teachers and students. Engagement in learning situations can also be extended to the service users. Social work education could benefit from including people who use social work services as knowledge carriers to a greater extent. This can be achieved either by doing action-based and participatory research with students or by collaborating with people who use social work services. Good social work practice involves being able to handle uncertainty together with the people who are experiencing the hardship, and working with more empowering work practices within social work education (Pollack & Mayor, 2024). The notion of seeing service users as educators, however, can encounter resistance as this can be experienced as challenging the academic monopoly on knowledge (Wallengren Lynch et al., 2019; Whitaker et al., 2022).

Responsiveness to others and self

Responsiveness was another subcategory identified from the students' workshop. They stressed the importance of being a knowledge-seeker, a person continuously searching for new knowledge. Showing humility before the limits of one's own knowledge and having insight into the importance of being open to seeking new knowledge are essential traits of phronesis, or practice wisdom. Responsiveness toward self and others is also reported in previous research (Edwards & Richards, 2002; Halton et al., 2023; Wang, 2012) as an important aspect of how to learn professional knowledge in social work. Practicing responsiveness, experiencing engagement, and handling uncertainty could also be further developed by exploring relational reflexivity. Taking a more

critical stance emphasizing social justice principles within social work education and practice (Halton et al., 2013).

The teachers in the present study also underlined the importance of looking to critical reflections as a source of professional knowledge and using forms of academic learning that emphasize reflecting together with others. An example of this in the academic context is the tradition of literature seminars, where students and teachers meet to collectively reflect on different interpretations of a text. This type of dialogue, which allows for one's own perspective to be broadened and entails openness and asking questions rather than providing answers in the search for knowledge, would be another step in the development of students' professional knowledge by letting all voices be heard in dialogical conversations (cf. Arnkil & Seikkula, 2015; Seikkula et al., 2018).

Implications for practice

The results from the workshops show that professional knowledge in social work can be stimulated in social work education through various pedagogical tools. But the teachers at the workshop expressed that professional knowledge cannot be taught in isolation from relational teaching, in which committing and relating are experienced as part of the education. Teachers in an academic context find it increasingly difficult to establish relationships and have qualitative meetings with students, due to larger student groups and less time for teaching. Increased demands for efficiency, increased administrative burden, and less time for pedagogical competence development and for learning collectively along with others all impact social work teaching.

Organizational professionalism in line with NPM has come to have an increased influence on social work education. It is not unusual for students today to primarily ask for manuals, guidelines, and toolkits rather than thinking about how cooperation with people using social work services and networks can be further developed (cf. Bornemark, 2018; Hingley-Jones & Ruch, 2016). Teachers in higher education, such as academic social work education, also face systemic challenges to maintaining the quality of the education. An increasing teaching load and larger class sizes make it more challenging to develop relationships with students (cf. Feigenbaum & Iqani, 2015).

Teachers in social work programs need to develop relationships with their colleagues and further reflect on professional knowledge in social work in order to be able to convey this to students. Time for reflection and nurturing relationships, and thus for developing professional knowledge within academia and among colleagues, is scarce. Even less is the time that teachers spend with students, at least from a Swedish perspective, with teachers often meeting student groups of 70 or even more at each lecture. Given the significant influence of lived experiences on the motivation to become a social worker,

social work education programs must consider this and help students (and teachers) identify both the advantages of their lived experiences as well as any potential career challenges. A person's lived experiences may either help them get through the academic and professional challenges of becoming a social worker, or cause them to become disillusioned and unsatisfied as they attempt to balance their personal and professional lives and forge a "professional identity" (Mooney et al., 2023) and a stable psychological contract (Welander et al., 2020). Teachers and researchers in social work need to regard professional knowledge as relevant and in need of further development in social work education, on both undergraduate and graduate levels.

Concluding remarks

A concluding remark is that professional knowledge needs to have influence in both teaching and research practice related to social work. Our empirical examples come from teachers and students in social work educational programs in Sweden, and teachers in Ireland. In the year the study was conducted (2023), professional knowledge seems to have had an uncertain place, despite support from dedicated academic teachers. During the workshops, participants emphasized the need for a more action-oriented and relational-based social work education. Fostering professional knowledge among students places great demands both on teachers, in terms of their own commitment and participation, and also on the higher education institutions in regard to supporting teaching practices that are creative and innovative. Fostering students' professional knowledge within education also involves forming learning experiences that can be extended from the classroom to practice and further on to research.

The results of this study show that the teachers and students who participated in the workshops would like to have more teaching practices for developing professional knowledge and relational social work in social work education. There is consensus within the social work community that people need people rather than an increasing "empaperment" (Bornemark, 2018, 2020) of the profession. The problem that both Swedish and Irish social workers experience, however, is that in social work practice more emphasis is placed on administrative than relational work (cf. Nordesjö et al., 2022). Using creative teaching methods in education often requires smaller groups, which can encourage students as well as teachers to engage in further professional knowledge development related to social work. However, with the exceptions shared in this article, the development in social work education has been heading in the opposite direction: toward larger class sizes and heavier teaching and administrative workloads. We perceive this as an obstacle to creating an educational environment that enables and promotes the development of professional knowledge in social work education. It is important to encourage

students to reflect on their own life and values. A useful exercise could be to ask the student to imagine being in the service user's position and having to meet oneself as a social worker; what would that be like? Through increased empathy for the service user as a person, students (and teachers) will have more incentive to consider techniques that will enable and enhance their professional knowledge in professional interactions with people in need of welfare support.

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