One Social Worker’s Snapshots: Of students and poverty, a teaching tool and supervision

Thesis submitted by
Deborah NILSSON BSW *UQ* GCertEd *JCU*

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Statement on the contribution of others

This thesis has been prepared with the contribution of Professor Rosamund Thorpe as supervisor. No other person has actively contributed with statistical support, editorial assistance, research assistance or any other assistance.

The School of Social Work and Community Welfare has supported my work by approving periods of leave and by allowing me to use my IRA monies to attend four Conferences where this work has been presented. There have been no other resources or outside assistance provided.

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Abstract

Social Work is far from ‘just’ a job. How can it be when one of its paramount concerns is the pursuit of social justice? In the same vein, whatever social workers are involved with, they need to be able to examine their work in relation to how what they are doing contributes to a more socially just society. It is not enough to just do ‘the’ job. Logically following on from this then, a social worker employed as a lecturer must act in ways that promote social justice – it is not enough to aim only to be a good lecturer or an effective teacher, for underlying these roles is that one is a social worker. The papers presented here describe some examples of one social worker’s attempts to apply the objectives of social justice in her work as a teacher in a university environment.

This thesis is a portfolio of research papers and conference presentations. The common theme is students – in the higher education sector, in the classroom and in placements. The sub-themes are social work and social work education. It is the work of a practitioner researching her practice and looking for ways to improve that practice. It is therefore applied research that is descriptive and qualitative in approach.

Given the reflective research approach taken, some of the findings have been incorporated into teaching practices as part of the process. The success achieved in the application of some strategies, supports a recommendation for those involved in teaching and learning environments, to include a range of ways of cultivating the imagination of participants to enhance learning outcomes. Success also with a model of supervision which advocates the use of vision as a base for supervision, leads to a further recommendation for such an approach to be considered by workers and students wanting an egalitarian, cooperative, power sharing arrangement in supervision. Other findings such as the need for action to address student poverty and particularly when that poverty is exacerbated by the requirement of student placements, are matters for many stakeholders such as the professional associations, the universities, the government, the human services and agencies involved in placements, to address.

One does need to strive to overcome unfairness caused by unequal access, to work towards upholding the rights of participants in a range of processes, to encourage others to reduce the barriers that prevent access to essential resources, and to foster active participation so that people have real opportunities to have a voice and be involved in decision making processes. The research demonstrates that it is both possible and necessary for a social worker in a teaching role to work in a myriad of ways that do this and in so doing work to promote social justice.
Contents

List of Figures x

Introduction and Overarching Framework 1
  Rationale 1
  Contextual locating 8
  Methodology 10
  A World View 22
  Findings and Recommendations 26
  Conclusion 27
  References 29

CHAPTER 1 32
Students are people (in poverty) too!
  Introduction 32
  Background 32
  Same But Different 34
  The Human Face/Place in the Curriculum 36
  By What Name Shall They Be Known? 37
  Education – A Way (Into and) Out of Poverty 38
  The Case Example 40
  Conclusion 41
  References 42
  Appendices
    1.1 Presentation to the Social Policy Association Conference 2000 44
    1.2 Presentation to the National Association of Field Experience Administrators Conference 2005 58

CHAPTER 2 69
The fridge, freezer, and pantry cupboard: An analogy
  Introduction 69
  The Background 69
  Explaining the analogy 73
    Size 73
    Location 73
    Variety of supplies 74
    Food selection 75
    Preparation aspects 77
  Application of the analogy – broad aspects 78
    Social 78
    Economic 78
    Political 79
    Spiritual 79
    Cultural 79
    Environmental 79
    Global 80
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Vision as a base for supervision</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social Work – what we entered to do and what we do</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supervision – its place in social work</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using vision as a base for supervision</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>References</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1 Presentation to the Australian Counselling and Supervision Conference 2005</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>CODA: A concluding passage</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>References</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Types of Research</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Experiential Learning Cycle</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Integration of Theory and Practice (ITP) Loop</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>An adaptation of Bogo and Vayda’s Integration and Practice Loop</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The Action Research Spiral</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Spiral Model of Learning</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Testing and evolving theory</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Contextual locating</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Cover – Social Policy Association Conference 2000</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Cover – National Association of Field Experience Administrators Conference 2005</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Cover – Global Social Work Congress 2004</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Cover – Australian Counselling and Supervision Conference 2005</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>