Transition to Professional Social Work Practice: The First Three Years

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the findings of a longitudinal research project that followed the employment outcomes of one cohort of Bachelor of Social Work graduates for three years. Prior to graduation, students receive professional preparation that develops their ability to critically engage with theory and practice. Following graduation, newly qualified social workers require quality induction, supervision and other workload management strategies to support the transition to social work practice. The development of this study was fuelled by political criticism of social work education. Additionally, there was a desire to track the employment outcomes of the graduates and understand what supported their transition to competent professional practice.

The findings fit within a five-year longitudinal research project that follows three separate graduate cohorts each for three years to seek and compare participants' experiences for their first three years post-qualification. An anonymous, semi-structured, on-line survey was used to provide both quantitative and qualitative data. By the second year of practice, these respondents were taking on the workload of an experienced social work practitioner with widely varied levels of support. By the end of their third year in practice, they reported that they had found little opportunity to apply their critical analytical academic skills to consider the wider social system in practice. Further, the graduates' confidence in their cultural competencies also gradually decreased over the three-year period.

INTRODUCTION

Social work in Aotearoa New Zealand has been undergoing a process of professionalisation for many decades and, since 2003, has initiated a voluntary statutory process of registration of social workers. However, many social workers remain unconnected to any professional accountability process, through either registration or belonging to a professional body (Hunt, 2016). Further, the practice of social work in a neoliberal environment has resulted in a managerial focus on measurable outputs and risk aversion, leaving little scope for critical reflection or asserting apolitical voice (Healey, 2009).

Jack and Donnellan (2010) assert that social work qualifications are "an anchor for the development of full professional status" (p. 306), reflecting that social work expertise is a subject that cannot be taught fully while in training (Tham & Lynch, 2014). In a study of managers of newly qualified social workers, the participants considered that the time required for the transition to competent practitioner ranged from six months through to two to three years (Manthorpe, Moriarty, Stevens, Hussein, & Sharpe, 2014). Contrary to political debate that social work education should produce fully fledged professionals upon qualification (Bennett, 2014, cited in Beddoe, 2014; Narey, 2014, cited in Grant, Sheridan, & Webb, 2016), the literature suggests that the transition period from a newly qualified social worker into a competent practitioner requires complex and comprehensive supports. These supports include quality induction processes, regular supervision, regular continued professional development (CPD), caseload protection in both volume and complexity, peer and organisational support, and an environment that fosters reflective practice (Bates et al., 2010; Beddoe, Davys, & Adamson, 2014; Bradley, 2008; Grant et al., 2016; Hunt, Lowe, Smith, Kuruvila, & Webber-Dreadon, 2016; Moorhead, Bell, & Bowles, 2016).

In this article, we follow one cohort of new graduate social workers from a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programme in Aotearoa New Zealand over their first three years of social work practice and discover the challenges they experienced as they make the transformation into competent professional social work practitioners. We hear about their perceptions of their own readiness for practice and the impact of the organisational environment on the development of a professional identity. We explore their paid and unpaid work outcomes and conditions, their support needs as well as their perceptions of their readiness for practice against the New Zealand Social Workers Registration Board's (SWRB) 10 core competencies. Preliminary findings from the first cohort after their first year of practice identified variable availability of supports to ease the demands of that year (Hunt et al., 2016).

Literature Review

Social work education offers a broad knowledge-base that synthesises practitioner skills such as communication, assessment and intervention; professional skills such as critical thinking underpinned by ethical and legal principles; and social science theories that build the foundation for evidence-based social work practice (Cheron-Sauer, 2013; Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Grant et al., 2016; Harrison & Healy, 2016; Moriarty, Manthorpe, Stevens, & Hussein, 2011; Nixon & Murr, 2006). In a recent study with newly qualified social workers in Sweden, Tham and Lynch (2014) found that the majority of participants identified that the broad academic knowledge-base was what attracted them to social work education, as it presented the opportunity to work in various fields of practice. Beddoe (2014) supports this position, arguing

that social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand claims a space in critically considering social policy tensions and the impact on vulnerable client groups. Many writers (Bates et al., 2010; Grant et al., 2016; Hunt et al., 2016), refer to the iterative process involved in transforming broad academic knowledge into practice expertise. Such iterative processes develop gradually and are shaped within the context of practice and the organisational environment. Grant et al. (2016), in a review of social work education in Scotland, found that the majority of the newly qualified social workers in their study felt confident in engaging with a complex web of social problems.

In an independent review of social work education in England, Croisdale-Appleby (2014) reported that it was "illogical, highly undesirable and unsafe" (p. 70) for employers to expect newly qualified social workers to take on a caseload similar to that of an experienced social worker. Furthermore, the newly qualified social worker programme commissioned by the Department for Education in the United Kingdom (UK) (Carpenter et al., 2010), reports a positive impact for new practitioners in terms of confidence to practice and job satisfaction. In the Australian context, Healy (2009) notices employer expectations are that educational institutions produce newly qualified social workers who can "hit the ground running." This reflects a managerialist approach reluctant to invest in targeted induction, CPD, and regular supervision regarding social service delivery. Generic social work education produces newly qualified social workers who have the ability to practise in diverse fields, and in a manner that reflects social work values within wider ecological systems (Bradley, 2008; Osteen, 2011). On the other hand, a managerialist approach to social service delivery reflects an organisational push for specialised social work training, with less focus on critical reflection and political inquiry (Green, 2006; Healy, 2009; Moriarty & Manthorpe, 2013; Newberry-Koroluk, 2014). As a counter to the restricted managerialist approach, academics in New Zealand also argue for outcomes-based education and a whole-of-career approach to professional development (Ballantyne, 2016; Beddoe, 2014).

Considering that the first few years of practice is thought to frame future professional identity and cement professional values (Harrison & Healy, 2016), it is crucial that newly qualified social workers receive intensive, structured induction and support (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Guerin, Devitt, & Redmond, 2010). Induction is also viewed as a beneficial exercise to guard against overload, burnout and ultimately to enhance employee retention (Bradley, 2008; Smith & Pilling, 2007). However, the ability for managers to administer comprehensive, structured induction may be stymied by the reality of busy workload pressures. Bates et al. (2010), in their UK study of the newly qualified social workers in their first year post-qualification, found that ongoing training and CPD bridges the gap between initial qualifications and more specialised practice knowledge. Studies that found a lack of CPD opportunities, reported that newly qualified social workers felt devalued and lacking in managerial support (Grant et al., 2016; Guerin et al., 2010; Jack & Donnellan, 2010). In a study of newly qualified social workers in the non-government community sector, Harrison and Healy (2016) found that fixed-term contracts, increasingly being utilised under social service market rationalities, all acted to preclude newly qualified social workers from being offered CPD opportunities.

Building on the importance of career-long CPD, Daley's (2001) study investigated how knowledge became meaningful in professional practice. She found that emotional encounters

with clients that "challenged knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions" (p. 48) triggered a re-organisation of professional identity, as practitioners were forced to re-examine and reflect on their own practice. This reflexivity in turn developed emotional resilience from which to draw upon in the future amplifying the importance of suitable and on-going supervision in which to critically reflect on the meaning-making process that constructs professional identity (Beddoe et al., 2014). Collins (2008) research indicates that newly qualified social workers' experiences of supervision were variable. Other research has found that newly qualified social workers admitted they obtained greater support through their peers and colleagues (Bradley, 2008; Grant et al., 2016; Harrison & Healy, 2016; Smith & Pilling, 2007).

The transition of a newly qualified social worker into a professional social work practitioner is also deeply affected by the political environment (Harrison & Healy, 2016; Moorhead et al., 2016; Newberry-Koroluk, 2014). Within a neoliberal environment, the welfare state is built upon politico-economic ideologies that favour diminished governmental responsibility, individualism, and market-based values, leading to social work practice that focuses on measurable outputs (Bradley, 2008; Collins, 2008; Healy, 2009), with an emphasis on "defensible" risk assessment, statutory control and individual compliance (Harrison & Healy, 2016; Mullaly, 2001). Newly qualified social workers must negotiate the conflicting tensions "between Government diktat, employer responsibilities and the social justice needs of those who use services" (Bates et al., 2010, p. 166). The role of the social worker can become depoliticised (Green, 2006; Newberry-Koroluk, 2014) leaving little space for reflexive, analytical, person-centred practice (Green, 2006; Moriarty & Manthorpe, 2013). Hyslop (2017) supports this position, arguing "social work has always been a challenging and conflicted job—that is the beauty of doing it well. It is important to have a critical under-standing of the relationship between our practice and its wider context, historically, and in the now" (p. 1).

Stakeholder investment in the preparation and support for newly qualified social workers appears to be decreasing in line with a strengthening managerialist approach. Our research provides a step in the direction of recalibration, calling for greater investment from the stakeholders to strengthen collaboration involving the newly qualified social worker, educators, employing agencies and their employees, under the sanction of the social work profession to rebalance the current political discourse.

METHOD

The full longitudinal study surveys three cohorts of students, each for three years post-qualification. This article focuses on the full data set for cohort one, as they have now completed three surveys regarding their practice post-qualification. While the data from cohort one are provided by a reasonably high proportion of returnees, it is a small sample size overall. However, these participants were surveyed annually for three years. Further, these findings are part of a larger, ongoing study, so the data will be able to be compared as the study progresses. The longitudinal study method was most appropriate to gain insights into the time order of variables (Bryman, 2012).

Respondents

The survey was emailed out to the first cohort of graduates annually for three consecutive years after their graduation day inviting them to complete the survey.
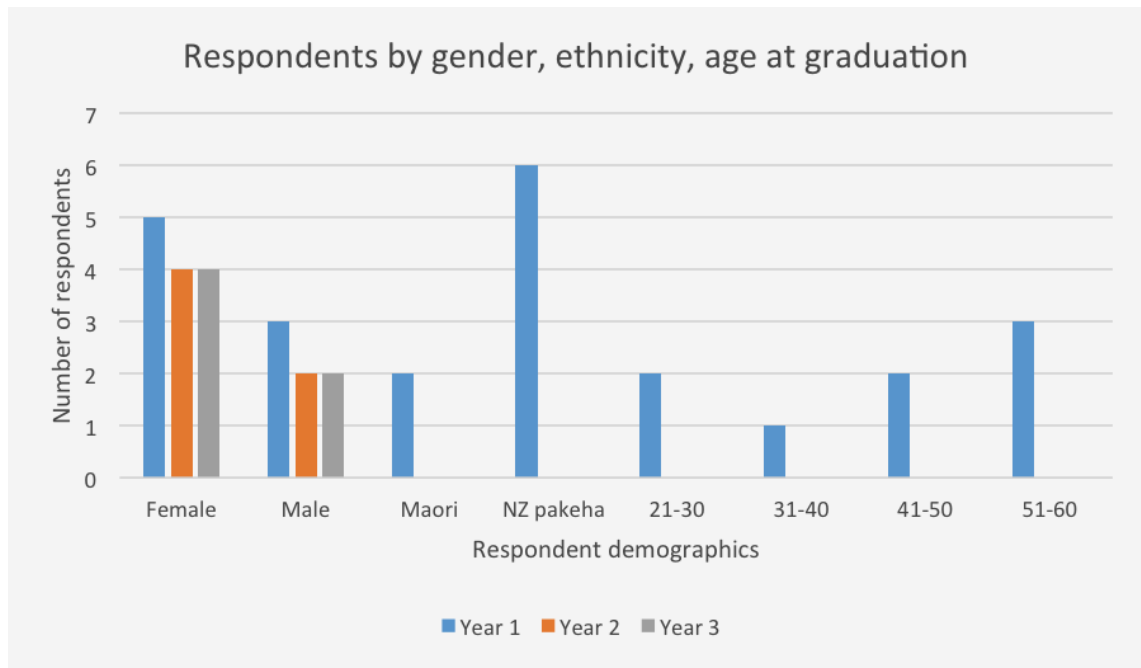

Figure 1.

While we had eight respondents in the first survey, one male and two females did not participate in the further two surveys. However, one respondent who did not participate in the first survey, completed the second and third surveys, resulting in four females and two male graduates completing the second and third surveys.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was received from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee, University of Waikato Protocol No FS2014-09. The researchers had all previously taught the graduates being surveyed, are all full members of the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW), are registered social workers and thus considered the responsibilities of social worker research according to the principles of these bodies (ANZASW, 2013; Social Workers Registration Board, 2014).

Instruments

The anonymous online survey was chosen to limit social desirability bias (Kreuter, Presser, & Tourangeau, 2008; Van de Mortel, 2008) and created with Qualtrics®. The survey contained a structured questionnaire, which included both open and closed questions canvassing participants' perceptions of their readiness for practice and professional employment experiences. The questionnaire was debated by the full research team and informed by previous literature. The questionnaire was slightly amended after the second year of its use to include more information about supervision, registration, membership of professional bodies, and a section seeking advice from graduates to students who are qualifying as social workers to provide greater depth of information.

Procedure: Data Collection and Analysis

The BSW graduates in cohort one of our study were emailed invitations to complete the online survey with the link to the questionnaire in the month of May for three consecutive years. The information sheet was provided within the survey, respondents were informed that their participation was voluntary, and that the survey would take no more than 30 minutes to complete each time. Completion of the questionnaire implied consent. Graduates were sent two reminders to complete the survey in June of each year. Annually, the survey was available for 50 days and was closed in July each year. The respondents were asked to create a personal 5-digit code in order to enable us to confidentially track their personal information over the three years they participated in the study. Most of the questions required the respondents to select from a number of forced options while other questions were open ended and interpreted using qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

RESULTS /THEMES

Professional Status and Fields of Practice

Within a year of graduation, all the respondents were employed as social workers in New Zealand. The respondents in the first survey continued in paid social work in their second ($n = 6$) and third ($n = 6$) years' post-qualification. At the time of the second survey, one respondent was on maternity leave, and at the time of the third survey, one respondent was not employed as a social worker. None of the respondents changed their social work positions in their second year and one respondent changed their role in their third year, which also involved relocating for their new position. The majority of the respondents over the three years were employed full-time as social workers ($n = 6$, $n = 4$, $n = 4$) with one working part-time in their second year (24–32 hours per week) and another part-time in their third year (16–24 hours per week).
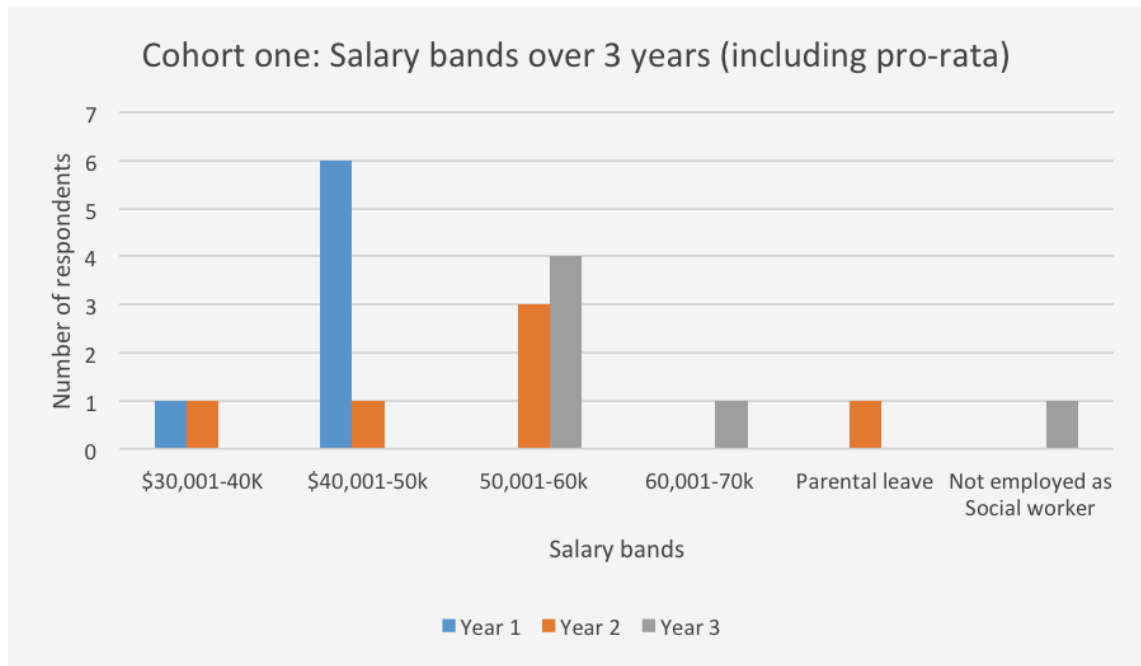

Figure 1.

All respondents who were employed at the time of the survey had permanent employment contracts at the end of their second and third years in practice (6/7 in year 1; 5/5 in year 2; 5/5 in year 3) indicating security of employment. There was an overall increase in remuneration for the respondents over their first three years of practice showing a steady career pathway for the newly qualified social workers.

The respondents worked in range of fields of practice and by the end of their second and third year of practice this was reasonably evenly split between government (statutory care and protection of children and young people (n = 2), mental health (n = 1) and non-government organisations (n = 2) including an iwi[1] social service focusing on family violence.

Paid Work Responsibilities

In an open-ended question, respondents were asked to state the major responsibilities experienced in their social-work positions. While there were only minor differences in the data over the three surveys regarding employment and fields of practice, the respondents indicated that the complexities and responsibilities within their social work position had increased, with one respondent reporting that, by their third year of practice, they had "moved into an interim clinical supervisor role." One respondent had changed social work position after three years in frontline care and protection, as they "felt it was time for a change before I burnt out".

By the second and third years of practice, respondents were much more specific with listing major responsibilities which included case management, child and young persons' risk assessment and protection, advocacy, support and advice for families, clinical supervision, funder reporting, working as part of a multidisciplinary team, assessing for drug and alcohol addiction and mental health issues, and working in the family violence field. Interventions, approaches and models of practice utilised included early intervention, strength-based approaches, client-centred approaches, and recovery models, focusing on micro and meso levels of practice. No respondent over the three years mentioned engaging with interventions at the macro level, although this was not a specifically queried.

Professional Accountability and Linkages

All respondents identified registration as an employment requirement. At the time of the surveys, social worker registration in Aotearoa New Zealand legislated in the Social Workers Registration Act (2003) was not a mandatory requirement. Over the first three years of practice however, the majority gradually achieved registration with two registering within their first year of practice, two within their second year and one in their third year leaving one respondent still working through the process.

Membership of a professional body followed a similar trend with four out of six respondents by the third year becoming members of ANZASW and one other currently completing the membership process. One respondent cited "financial reasons" for not becoming a member of their professional association earlier. Another respondent who was registered but not a

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Iwi: Tribe, extended kinship group, larger group pf people descended from a common ancestor (Māori dictionary, 2017).
Pākehā: Non-Māori New Zealander (Māori dictionary, 2017).

member of ANZASW expressed that this was a conscious decision, as they "did not agree with their [ANZASW] current direction."

Support for New Graduate Social Workers

Respondents were asked about structured support that included induction, supervision, additional mentoring, workload protection, and CPD.

Induction

Over the three years of the study, the respondents' reflection on the quality of their induction in their first social work position showed little agreement as it ranged from "poor" ($n = 1$), "fair" ($n = 2$), "good" ($n = 1$), and "very good" ($n = 2$). Two of the respondents who changed employers in their first year of practice rated their induction into their next social work position more highly.

Supervision and additional mentoring

As with induction, the respondents reported differing experiences of supervision. By the end of the respondents' second year of practice all but one regularly received supervision ($n = 5$), with one stating that they received supervision but it was not regular. One respondent also had a mentor in addition to their supervisor. However, two respondents (one of whom was registered) also provided supervision for others. After three years post-qualification, all respondents were regularly receiving supervision ($n = 6$), two respondents had an additional mentor, and two registered respondents were providing supervision for others. The quality of supervision varied for them although they all affirmed the significance of supervision in their practice, with one specifically commenting that supervision was "vital". Under half of the respondents ($n = 2$) described their experiences of supervision as effective. One respondent disclosed that the effectiveness of supervision had been "dependent on the organisation", and another divulged that the quality of supervision had been compromised due to multiple changes in supervisor.

We probed for further information on the frequency, type, and effectiveness of supervision by the third year of practice. One respondent commented that supervision so far had been "… infrequent and thus far fairly average. Not promoting professional development and instead more focused on KPI's and case direction". Other responses were more favourable, with one reporting that supervision was "initially weekly then fortnightly and now monthly. This has been really effective". Another respondent stated they had benefited from a combination of both internal and external supervision.

Caseload protection

Unlike the first year of practice where half of the respondents received formal or informal caseload protection at least for the first six months in their role, by the end of their second year of paid social work practice post-qualification, none had workload protection. Reasons were cited for this included lack of resources, lack of suitable supervision, an expectation you will just "do the mahi [work]," high workload "even when concern [was] expressed about unsafe practice," being considered competent "once you have made it past two years you are considered competent."

One respondent however, reported that they had negotiated caseload protection in their third year of practice, as their new workplace responsibilities resulted in an increase of more complex and intensive cases. By the third survey, two of the respondents noted that they were now considered experienced social workers, thus not requiring workload protection. One respondent observed, "You are seen to be competent almost immediately in social work if you perform well. Work load pressures are so high and staff turnover so high that it is viewed as unrealistic to protect people's workloads".

Another respondent also linked organisational issues with the lack of workload protection, citing "… constant changes in management and staffing, inadequate understanding and/or involvement in social work practice, inadequacy and uncertainty around funding."

Continuing professional development

Although only one respondent in both the second and third year post-qualification had under-taken postgraduate study, the majority of the respondents in the second and third year post-qualification ($n = 4$) indicated an interest in future postgraduate study. The areas of interest identified were diverse as the respondents begin to identify fields of practice in which they wished to specialise and include counselling, alcohol and drug, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, mental health, family violence, management, and supervision. One respondent expressed an interest in completing a master's followed by a doctorate, displaying a willingness to invest a significant amount of time into postgraduate study in the future. While we did not probe for other CPD undertaken, including in-house training or short courses, respondents were encouraging regarding the value of CPD, "upskill and train at every opportunity and consider post grad study to hone skills and learning in specialist areas."

Application of overarching knowledge

As with the first year post-qualification, respondents after their second and third years were asked to reflect on their graduate confidence in fulfilling the 10 SWRB competency standards and we found the responses closely align with the findings after the first year post-qualification (Hunt et al., 2016). However, the respondents' reflection on the level of their competence for two core competencies had notably decreased since their first year of practice: competence to practise social work with Māori, and competence to practice social work with different ethnic and cultural groups in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Aspects of the BSW Most Relevant to Employment

When asked to describe the most relevant aspects of the BSW programme to their current social work position, the diverse fields of practice greatly influenced the responses. In addition to the earlier findings (Hunt et al., 2016), one respondent referred to the ongoing debate between social work educators' support for generic social work training versus social service agencies that favour specialist knowledge. The respondent stated that the BSW offered "…broad insight into multiple societal issues … all experiences have contributed to a holistic approach."

Another stressed the complexity of social work practice while reinforcing that becoming a professional is a gradual process that builds on the foundational knowledge that newly qualified social workers possess.

… no amount of study can totally prepare you for a statutory position. On the job learning is just as important, but what we learnt as student means that we have been able to put [a] different knowledge base forward in relation to our social work positions.

One respondent found that they had benefited from the political focus of the BSW in their practice, due to the "… strong emphasis on social policy for insight into governmental strategies around funding and advocacy."

Challenges in Practice

Respondents in both the second and third year post-qualification considered that interpersonal conflicts such as "bullying in the workplace," and "office politics," produced challenges for them in their practice. One respondent criticised "toxic colleagues that have no business working with vulnerable people," while another respondent observed the presence of "process driven workers that lose site [sic] of the individual [client] and their needs." Also highlighted were potentially unsafe work environments, in relation to "organisations that are all about contract volumes and less about people."

Uncertainty from clients and other professions regarding a professional social work identity "people confuse me with counsellors", as well as the stereotypical view of the social workers' client base, were also noted by the respondents as factors that produced challenges in practice. Becoming registered and utilising the code of ethics helped some respondents maintain ethical principles and uphold professional integrity when facing these barriers. "Social work [is often] perceived as being an inadequate, underdeveloped profession [yet] the expectation if no other professional could sort out the situation, leave it to the social worker."

Devaluation of the social work profession was also noted, specifically referencing remuneration and the dilution of the social work roles within governmental organisations. One respondent felt that while working in a non-government organisation (NGO) was undervalued, the "lower status" provided an inspiration to work with vulnerable people in society.

The challenge of practising social work within a risk-averse environment was referred to by the respondents, with one describing the "… ethical quandaries when stuck between what you believe would be best for the whānau and what you are instructed to do by management."

Restrictive environments within statutory agencies that focus on risk aversion, was seen to hinder the application of innovative social work decision-making, leading to challenges in practice. One respondent noted:

Coming to terms with the restrictive nature of government department social work and learning to channel my skill set as a social worker into the avenues available to me in this line of work. Realising that I won't be able to change the world and to value the small successes I do get.

Another respondent countered the restrictive nature of statutory social work by working in a NGO, noting that the "lack of statutory clout called for innovative and co-operative relationships to work for the good of the families."

Emotional demands and accompanying stress of social work practice was identified as another challenge by the all respondents. One respondent after their third year of practice high-lighted. "Stress would be a big one and some sad cases that get to you; i.e. one of my young people I had on my case load [for] three years committed suicide last year. That was tough."

Another respondent raised the importance of emotional intelligence, and building emotional resilience:

Being exposed to upsetting scenarios of child abuse and neglect over an extended period and having very little support provided in the way of dealing with this. I would say resilience is something that should be more of a focus in the BSW as most social work fields seem to have a high burn out rate.

Advice for Newly Qualified Social Workers

In a new addition to the survey, the respondents in the third year post-qualification were asked in an open-ended question what advice they would give to provide support for future graduates. All of the respondents (*n* = 6) provided realistic but motivational accounts of what newly qualified social workers should expect in their first years of practice, such as always feeling tired, and the need to constantly question, challenge and be ethical "conduct yourself in a way that allows you to sleep at night." One respondent commented that "75% of their learning will happen on the job," therefore newly qualified social workers should not be "too hard on themselves" when entering the workforce. Another respondent affirmed that newly qualified social workers should not get too "caught up with what should be done, do what you can with the resources you have." One respondent captured the dynamism of the profession, urging newly qualified social workers to "take every opportunity you are offered and enjoy."

Creating and holding onto self-care strategies was promoted as a means to create a healthy work–life balance, "if you don't have any, get some!" Related to self-care and recognising the challenges newly qualified social workers face in developing a professional identity, was the need to "keep socialising and laughing—perspective is important especially as the social work profession is under scrutiny and judgement given we work with our community's most vulnerable." One respondent discussed the possibility of burnout, particularly when working within statutory care and protection. "Try and take care of themselves and do their best not to let the job overtake their lives. It is so easy to do, particularly in CYF, and can have very serious consequences."

Supervision, registration, and the ANZASW (2013) *Code of Ethics* were advanced as vital instruments to buffer against the tensions inherent in social work. "Be prepared, a lot of professional social work is consciousness raising about our work and how we see people and our worldview, which often means challenging entrenched thinking while still maintaining communication and availability."

One respondent identified the importance of newly qualified social workers recognising the use of self; … "take all you have learned from the BSW and who you are as a person, and use the two effectively."

One respondent encouraged newly qualified social workers to cherish the initial motivation that originally drew them into the profession. "Don't let the cynics disillusion you, hold on to the reasons why you took on the degree in the first place."

Discussion

Social work is linked to the historical and socio-political context of practice, which frames the iterative process involved in the integration of theory with practice (Bates et al., 2010). Congruent with the literature discussed in this article (Ballantyne, 2016; Beddoe 2014; Carpenter et al., 2010), tracing the experiences of newly qualified social workers over their first three years of practice identified that the political climate plays a significant role in the development of a professional identity, and impacts on opportunities for them to engage in reflective practice.

Political Inquiry

Newly qualified social workers enter a challenging professional world that requires an enormous shift of thinking from students (Smith & Pilling, 2007), and involves navigation through the unpredictable tensions that lie between individuals and the state. Inevitably, the values of the dominant political ideology prescribes the causes and solutions to social problems, which, in turn, frames the provision of social services and social work, practice (O'Brien, 2016). The neoliberal view that social problems are related to individual choice is an alluring concept to a market-based economy, as inequality is considered a natural consequence of shortcomings in a person's character and that requires intervention at an individual level (Newberry-Koroluk, 2014). Concentrating on individual empowerment and not the structural causes of inequality ignores the political aspects of the social work profession, which Green (2006) comments portrays social work as a practical activity, and acts to "de-professionalise and depoliticise the social work role" (pp. 250–251). The current political environment in Aotearoa New Zealand affects the newly qualified social workers' development of a professional identity, with little opportunity for reflection on macro issues in practice reported. The respondents reported they were considered to be fully competent practitioners by their second year of practice, carrying a full workload with restricted time for critical reflection and analysis.

Professional Identity

Newly qualified social workers enter a profession which has ambiguity sewn into its fabric, as social workers battle with the contradictory principles of control and empowerment (Green, 2006), and respond to unpredictability on a daily basis (Guerin et al., 2010). Further, a professional environment where not all social workers are required to be registered or academically trained creates uncertainty among other professionals and the public regarding what professional social work practice entails (Cheron-Sauer, 2013). This uncertainty was reflected in the findings in the way that multidisciplinary teams and other professions regarded the social work role. Adding to uncertainty is the political and public "voice" that openly criticises and seeks to influence the direction of social work practice (Green, 2006). Some respondents found that their commitment to the profession's code of ethics helped to overcome such barriers whilst upholding their professional integrity. Respondents referred to the low status of social work, both publically and as an academic profession, however, experiences of devaluation acted to create greater empathy towards the vulnerable people they work with.

Although the principles of human rights and social justice underpin social work practice, the variety of perspectives, diverse fields of practice, multidisciplinary practice, differing cultural contexts, and government policies not necessarily congruent with social work values, adds to the uncertainty in affirming a social work identity (Newberry-Koroluk, 2014). In order to balance the diverse factors that influence practice, newly qualified social workers are required to use their theoretical knowledge as a tool when building the framework of their professional identity (Harrison & Healy, 2016). The respondents noted that professional development was an ongoing process, indicating that university qualification was a foundation point, with much of their learning constructed in practice. This controverts political criticism that graduates should be frontline-ready, in both expertise and emotional intelligence (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Hunt et al., 2016). Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is identified as a way to connect generic social work information with specialist knowledge requiring regulators, educators, employers, and individual social workers to accept that social workers are lifelong learners (Moriarty & Manthorpe, 2013). Cheron-Sauer (2013) notes that additional specialised study enables social workers to gain a greater understanding of working with specific populations. Respondents found that gaining and maintaining cultural competence were most challenging, indicating that ongoing CPD could be channelled towards culturally responsive practice. Gray and Allegritti (2003) emphasise that being "culturally competent" is complex, due to the fluid nature of culture combined with continual questioning and reflection from the social work practitioner of their unconscious, but active, biases.

Gaining a social work qualification gives graduates a claim to professional status (Beddoe, 2014), and an ethical framework to promote social justice (Hunt, 2016). However, there is uncertainty over the professional legitimacy of the term "social worker" because, in a voluntary system of registration, there is no legal protection over the social work identity (Cheron-Sauer, 2013; Hunt, 2017). Respondents noted other professionals' confusion regarding the expertise and role of social work. Cheron-Sauer (2013) emphasises the importance of professional associations in collectively articulating a professional identity, and the opportunity this creates to publicise social issues through an independent, collective, political social work voice. Over the three years, respondents' membership in the ANZASW has increased, predominantly indicating a gradual awareness of the benefit of an independent professional voice.

Reflective Practice

Green (2006) questions if the shift in statutory social work toward a routinised, brokerage-type activity, is part of a political agenda to depoliticise the social work role, stifling the need for critical, reflective thinkers. Regardless of political intent, when organisations and agencies do not invest in reflective practice, the result is a professional identity that lacks engagement in critical thinking (Preston-Shoot & McKimm, 2012). In this environment, the social worker plays the central role in the relationship, but little investment is put into practice that uncovers the underlying causes of inequality. Induction, workload protection, ongoing CPD, supervision, and collegiality lay the foundation for reflective practice (Hunt et al., 2016), but time and resources are not always available due to fiscal accountabilities (Moorhead et al., 2016). Good quality induction appears to be a key to initial job satisfaction and staff retention (Bates et al., 2010) and is a means to help counter criticism and negative media portrayals of the profession (Jack & Donnellan, 2010; Donnellan & Jack, 2015).

Respondents referred to the realities of risk-averse practice, and variations on the quality of supervision, induction, and collegiality to allow time for reflection. Workload protection was non-existent by the second year of practice.

Supervision provides a safe place to critically reflect on practice, analyse the effect of structural power differentials on vulnerable clients, and bolster emotional resilience (Davys & Beddoe, 2010; Beddoe et al., 2014). However, when organisations use supervision as a managerial tool, it may become an administrative process that ignores the emotionally taxing realities of social work practice (Collins, 2008; O'Donoghue, 2010). One respondent referred to the managerial hijacking of supervision, which focused on case management. Organisational understanding of social work supervision was inconsistent, with two respondents reporting they provided supervision to others in their second year of practice—which does not meet the supervision expectations of either the profession (ANZASW, 2015) or the regulator of the profession (SWRB, 2014).

Collegial support or mentoring relationships that are built on a shared professional identity provides valuable support for newly qualified social workers (Beddoe et al., 2014) and are seen as critical to staff retention and providing a buffer against unsafe practice (Cheron-Sauer, 2013, Manthorpe et al., 2014). However, an oppressive workplace climate creates a fearful, distrusting atmosphere, which negatively affects the quality of social work practice and reflection, and staff retention (Cheron-Sauer, 2013). Office politics, bullying, and the effect of toxic colleagues created significant professional difficulties for some of the respondents in this study.

Developing self-care strategies was a common theme among respondents, as a means to counter-act the stress and unpredictability of social work practice. Although both pragmatic and critical regarding the realities of practice, after three years of practice the respondents exhibited a remarkable commitment to the social work values that initially lured them into the profession.

CONCLUSION

Over the three years following this cohort we have a stronger sense of the experiences and needs of these social workers in a period characterised by a managerial focus on risk aversion and measurable outputs. As individuals, the respondents amalgamate their academic knowledge-base, alongside professional values and those of their employing agencies. When organisations invest in structured individualised induction, quality supervision, ongoing CPD, and effective mentoring, the payoff is social workers who feel valued and emotionally equipped to withstand the pressures of practice. Unfortunately, not all respondents had experiences of supportive workplace environments. Newly qualified social workers should be encouraged to utilise their academic skills in practice to ensure the profession does not become an enforcer of the dominant ideology. The findings from this study resonate with literature from overseas that highlights how a managerial approach is detracting from the required quality of support for newly qualified social workers. This article is relevant for social work educators, employers, regulators, and the profession in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally as the widely varied and often specialised practice realities of beginning practitioners must be balanced with more generic social work education.

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End notes

1. Iwi: Tribe, extended kinship group, larger group pf people descended from a common ancestor (Māori dictionary, 2017).

2. Pākehā: Non-Māori New Zealander (Māori dictionary, 2017)