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Aligning values in applied professional practice: A case study of children's services qualifying programmes in a Scottish university

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ABSTRACT

This small-scale, qualitative, case study, conducted in a Scottish university's department of Education and Social Work, explored the role of professional values in children's services qualifying courses in Community Education, Social Work, and Teacher Education. The courses form the three principal undergraduate courses in the department, with students undertaking several shared modules. In addition, the study aimed to explore the extent to which students and lecturers had a shared understanding of the professional values, encouraged within university teaching and modelled in professional environments during placement. Data were gathered via online questionnaires from students and lecturers. These comprised Likert-scale-type quantitative questions along with questions which required a yes or no response, with a follow-up open text question where participants could explain their views. The open-text responses were analysed using content analysis and these are reported in this paper.

Key findings were that participants recognised the importance of professional values as a central tenet of the courses and that most could identify where these were addressed in teaching and learning opportunities. Key tensions were reported by participants between professional and personal values; dilemmas of values in practice; and scope for enhancement of alignment between university values, professional learning and praxis. An overarching theme was identified around the impact of neoliberal politics in higher education and the extent to which institutional values have caused the erosion of professionalism, integrity and autonomy with the imposition of increased workload within a culture of performativity.

Recommendations for academic practice include the development of more explicit links between the university and professional contexts and the development of the teaching about values on qualifying courses, regarding how personal values are formed and the role of external influencers in this process, which would be of benefit.

Keywords: Professional values, higher education, children's services, applied academic practice

Introduction

This study arose from professional discussions between lecturers and professionals who supervise student placements, who wished to explore whether students recognised that values were shared across the university and professional environments. We also wished to explore whether these were, indeed, the same or similar values.

This paper reports on the qualitative data gathered during a wider mixed methods study which took place in a department of Education and Social Work. The participants were all either lecturers or students on one of three undergraduate courses, namely Community Education, Social Work and Teacher Education. These courses share two modules, one of which focuses on professional values and the other on working collaboratively with other professionals. This study aims to add to the body of knowledge informing how

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well students and lecturers on these courses recognise that there are shared professional values, both across the roles of student and lecturer, and across the linked environments of the university classroom and the professional settings where they undertake placements.

Defining personal and professional values

Carr (2011) suggests that the definition of 'professional values' can be complex, due to the subjectivity of value judgements, for example whether someone's behaviour is acceptable. The publicly stated values held by the University which, in theory, underpin its practice and work, generally align with the expected professional values held by students and lecturers. The University's values are described on its website as: "valuing people, working together, integrity, making a difference, and excellence" (University of Dundee, 2022). These are echoed in some of the Professional Standards discussed later. This study took as its working definition of professional values the key words contained in the University's values statement that members of the University's community are expected to uphold and work towards, as these are common to all three disciplines represented in this study.

The question of whether community education, social work and teaching are regarded as professions was explored. Professions share specific characteristics, described by Fitzsimmons (2017, p.198) as "certain recognizable [sic] touchstones". These include required standards of practice following approved programmes of study (Fitzsimmons, 2017; Ortenblad, 2018); a requirement to hold membership of a regulatory body (Fitzsimmons, 2017; Hussain et al., 2023; Mackie et al., 2013; van Pelt et al., 2015), and to follow an ethical code (Ortenblad, 2018; van Pelt et al., 2015; Weiss-Gal & Welbourne, 2008). As these professions share these characteristics, we argue that they are indeed professions.

The importance of professional values, and values education supporting good practice pedagogy, is discussed by Lovat (2011) who argues that values education has a holistic positive effect on learning. More recently, Lovett (2020) discusses the way in which values and practice may align, commenting that professional discretion is required to enact this successfully. Lovett's views on leadership and the embedding of values within professional cultures is in broad agreement with Schein & Schein (2017). Similarly, the importance of teaching professional values (Perry et al., 2019), and bridging the theory-practice gap (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2021; Donmoyer et al., 2012; McGarr et al., 2017) is discussed. The development of shared values requires colleagues to not only discuss these but also value the learning that can come from appreciating each other's diversity. Qualifying programme providers also need to acknowledge the changing attitudes of students regarding social responsibility and their perceptions of the purpose of teaching and their educational ideals (Alfirevic et al., 2021; Cochran-Smith et al., 2017; Reeves 2018).

For professions where particular moral qualities are central to successful practice (such as social work, community education and teaching), Carr argues that practitioners need to have "principled dispositions or virtues" (2011, p.173). Here, the values of temperance, courage, honesty, and justice are essential in underpinning the practitioner's discharge of their duties in a moral and fair manner. Carr also discusses the distinction, in considering personal values, between a value and a preference. He suggests that values develop through careful consideration, proposing the phrase "principled preference" (p.172) to describe a personal value held. In establishing values, these are attributes which reflect an individual's personal preferences and position on societal issues such as honesty, trust, and respect (General Teaching Council for Scotland [GTCS], 2021a) and thus reflect and shape each of our personal identities. Professional values,

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similarly, reflect the professional identity held by those members of each children's services profession. They are expected to underpin the qualifying courses studied by future children's services professionals, and professionals are expected to model these values in their practice. Professional values, which should not be conflated with professional ethics, sit alongside professional ethics, or codes of conduct, for example the Scottish Social Services Council [SSSC], (2019, p.1) Standards for Social Workers, as well as referring to "practice ethically and with professional integrity", has a section in its Standards titled 'Ethical Principles'. Similarly, the GTCS has a Code of Professionalism and Conduct (GTCS, 2012) which sits alongside the suite of Professional Standards, and the Community Learning and Development [CLD] Standards Council [CLDSC] has a Code of Ethics (CLDSC, 2017) which sits alongside guidance on values in CLD and a framework for practitioner competency. These codes of conduct and ethics underpin expected behaviours of members of the regulatory bodies, and falling short of these expectations can lead to sanctions and, ultimately, disbarment from the profession.

Children's services professional values

As children's services professionals, community educators, social workers and teachers are required to be role models for those in their charge. Each qualifying course is mapped to the requirements of each accrediting Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) for the profession, and these include the requirement for professionals registered with the PRSB to model professional values within their practice. For example, the Standard for Provisional Registration for teachers states that "the professional values of social justice, trust and respect and integrity are at the heart of the Professional Standards" (GTCS, 2021b, p.4). As such, explicit teaching of professional values (Mergler & Spooner-Lane, 2012), to allow for incidental learning at other times, for example when on placement, is essential (Bowman et al., 2022; Simonsz et al., 2022; Veugelers, 2000). Gluchmanova (2021) discusses the importance of understanding professional values alongside other aspects of a profession's code of conduct, as do Madin et al. (2022), who state that teachers' personalities and professional activity should both be underpinned by "high ideals and aspirations…" (p.1) driven by a desire to encourage development in their learners. There are similar expectations regarding social workers, as discussed by (Osteen et al., 2021). Hill et al. (2022) argue that social justice and understanding this both in terms of content and disposition, should be taught in qualifying courses and that this should lead to changes in pedagogy. Throughout children's services professionals' careers, the role of professional learning and reflection in considering how practice expectations and development align, or otherwise, with one's professional values is argued by Nickel and Zimmer (2019) to have a pivotal role in whether a professional sees intrinsic value in their practice, seeking to develop mastery in the pedagogy which underpins their practice.

The literature is replete with studies examining the role of teacher and social work educators (Fenton, 2016; Jenset, 2020; Perry et al., 2019; Philpott, 2014). For example, an international comparative study highlighted the importance of lecturers modelling to their students what is discussed in class and observed on placement (Jenset, 2020), which would enable greater bidirectionality of learning about values across university and placement. In this regard, the concept of praxis has been used to develop critically reflective professionals while addressing professional standards and values (Daniels, 2017). Whilst it is less clear how institutional values inform pedagogical and professional practice, a developing narrative focuses upon the erosion of professionalism, integrity, and autonomy with the imposition of increased workload within a culture of performativity (Sachs, 2016; Tomlinson, 2018). This suggests a need for further research in this area.

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Tensions between personal, professional, and institutional values

Whilst expected professional values for each of these professions are realistic, tensions can, and do, arise between these and an individual's personal values. Engelbertink et al. (2022) argue that students should be supported in this aspect of their studies as they develop their professional identity. Gunetilleke et al. (2011) and Marthinsen et al.(2020) argue that the increasing predominance of liberal economic thought, which influences developmental discourse and practice, is a key factor in these tensions. Gunetilleke et al. (2011) further argue that perceived tensions may be addressed through either resolving these or by individuals choosing to work in areas which align more closely with their own values. Such tensions are heightened for community development practitioners, as the profession is continually seeking to balance whose values should prevail, foregrounding those of the communities where they work, especially as these are in a "constant process of becoming" (Banks, 2019, p.196). Similarly, qualified Social Workers can find that the bureaucracy where they work operates a different set of values to those of the profession (Marthinsen et al., 2020). The tensions inherent in this situation means that all possible values cannot be realised simultaneously. To ameliorate these tensions, practitioners highlight the value of working in smaller teams, creating their own communities of practice based around common values (Marthinsen et al., 2020). In school settings, the creation of this 'values-practice gap' can only be overcome through continuous professional learning and development, and the sharing of practices in managing values tensions between staff (Brennan & King, 2022).

The impact of bureaucracy translates to the concept of 'performativity' in the context of teaching (Frostenson & Englund, 2020). Similarly, Vieira et al. (2021, p.2) define education as being "value-laden" with an "ethical dimension". Here, the requirement to account to higher authorities against externally-imposed performance metrics – while mainly perceived as being at odds with humanistic values – can be ameliorated by working within the system in a flexible manner, such that the bureaucratic requirements facilitate the enactment of professional values. In this regard there is a call for teaching to be research-informed to address tensions within neoliberalist concepts such as performativity, accountability, and performance management culture (Sachs, 2016), whilst Kennedy (2018) suggests that teacher education programmes should be underpinned by critical activism to challenge societal inequalities and hegemonic discourses. Referring to an 'argumentative policy enquiry' approach to the development of a Master's ITE, Kennedy (2018) describes tensions between 'compliant and disruptive narratives' in higher education professional training programmes as higher education becomes increasingly marketised. Similarly, Tomlinson suggests that the meaning of values in education has been described as "synonymous with economic return and institutional accountability" and "the relationship between students and institutions ...to be increasingly transactional" (Tomlinson, 2018, p.715).

Whilst most higher education establishments now have a mission statement reflecting espoused values and beliefs regarding the overall purpose of university education located in the principles of social purpose and social justice (Collyer & Campbell, 2015; Elwick, 2020), it may be that lecturers now have to reconsider or re-shape their personal values in alignment with performance, competition and excellence agendas required by their employer. In addition to the influence of institutional values, lecturers on professional teaching programmes must also align their personal values with the standards of accrediting bodies such as those for teaching and social work (CLDSC, 2022; GTCS, 2021a & b; SSSC, 2019). Students must attain a required minimum standard of professional practice to be recommended for registration with the relevant professional body. Tensions (including 'clashing values', particularly between the individual and the setting) can contribute towards anxiety or self-doubt in early career teachers, along with a decrease in self-efficacy

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and engagement (sometimes to the extent of quitting) (Nickel & Crosby, 2022, p.323). For instance, these tensions can be experienced between an individual's religious beliefs and the requirements of their role to work in areas which run contrary to those, such as recognising the legitimacy of LGBTQI+ identities, advising individuals about abortion rights (Paprocki, 2023). Conversely, successful resolution of tensions between values and classroom practice helps teachers take greater responsibility for and achieve more fulfilment in their work (Nickel & Crosby, 2022, p.319).

Research Design

The current study is located within the interpretivist paradigm, described by Cohen et al. (2011) as focusing on action, specifically in this study to ensure that participants' perspectives informed enhancements to the delivery of the programmes under consideration. Our approach required the interpretation of students and lecturers' perspectives regarding the shared phenomenon of professional values.

Two research questions were explored in this study.

1) To what extent are professional values shared across the disciplines of community education, social work, and teacher education?

2) To what extent are professional values recognised in teaching and learning experiences by students and lecturers?

Our methodological approach was one in which the phenomenon was investigated incrementally (Williams, 2021). Having come to the study with our own understandings of 'values' (including a commitment to embodying our own professional values in our practice and teaching), we interacted with literature on the subject to shape our line of questioning. Questions were designed to generate 'rich' description, which prompted active engagement with the interplay of informants' experience and the ideas drawn from theory.

The empirical aspect of the study reported here sought to ascertain where and how professional values are taught and modelled by teaching staff through their engagements with students; and to determine how these interactions are experienced by both staff and students. Specifically, two surveys were created using JISC Online Surveys (available on request from the corresponding author), to capture the perspectives of students and lecturers who teach and learn on the qualifying courses which share a core undergraduate module, which addresses the interplay of personal, professional, and societal values. This paper reports on the qualitative open-text responses received from participants. These were optional follow-up questions to those requiring participants to respond with a 'yes' or 'no', for example, 'I believe that my professional values have developed as a result of teaching these on professional courses' (lecturers) and for students: 'I believe that I see professional values being modelled by my peers.' and 'When I am on placement, I see professional values being modelled by my colleagues.' A final open-ended question asked participants to suggest ideas for enhancing how professional values are taught within the department.

Participant Recruitment

Purposive sampling was undertaken, and students and lecturers who work on the qualifying courses described above were invited, via a dedicated research study email address, to participate. A link to the survey was provided in the emails, with participants being able to take part at a time and place of their own

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choosing. Informed consent was taken via participants clicking to confirm that they had read and understood the Participant Information Sheet, before moving to the survey questions which were hosted within JISC Online Surveys.

Initial data collection took place in June 2021, when staff illness meant that only the first recruitment email was sent. This resulted in a very small response rate, and the decision was taken to repeat data collection in December 2021-January 2022 over a 6-week period. Here, two reminder emails were sent, one after the first week, and a second at the start of the final week. Both sets of data were combined for the final analysis, resulting in sample sizes of 24 staff (36%) and 39 students (8%), with all three disciplines represented.. Of the participants, not all had chosen to provide follow-up responses, and some provided an open-text response to the final question only. Table 1 below shows the response rate for each population group.

Table 1: Survey response rate by population

	Community Education			Social Work			Teacher Education		
	Total response	Total providing follow-up responses	Total with response to final q. only	Total responses	Total providing follow-up responses	Total with response to final q. only	Total responses	Total providing follow-up responses	Total with response to final q. only
Lecturers	5 (42%)	4 (80%)	1 (20%)	6 (40%)	6 (100%)	0	11 (28%)	9 (81%)	1 (9%)
Students	19 (22%)	13 (68%)	6 (32%)	9 (7%)	3 (33.3%)	4 (44%)	11 (4%)	6 (55%)	4 (36%)

Ethical Considerations

Our commitment to ethical practice – reflected in our own professional standards – informed both study design and its implementation. We followed British Educational Research Association [BERA] ethical guidance (BERA, 2018) and ensured compliance with the University's Code of Practice for Non-clinical Research (University of Dundee, 2016). It was recognised that there is always a power dynamic between teacher-researchers and students. The use of a neutral email address for the purposes of communication about the study – thereby creating a 'buffer zone' between researchers and participants – minimised potential complications arising from unequal relationships (Bergmark, 2020).

It was important to present a balanced and objective discussion of the findings, in line with the principles of qualitative trustworthiness (Nowell et al., 2017; Robson, 2002) and being mindful of the possibility that researcher bias may lead to preferring some data over others (Bell, 2010; Maxwell, 2005), we ensured that in selecting participant quotations a balance between the three disciplines was reached, and that one participant's views were not privileged over others, as shown in Table 2. Of the 15 student participants quoted, four Teacher Education students and one Social Work student were cited twice, and from the 7 lecturer participants, one Teacher Education lecturer was cited twice.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the School Research Ethics Committee, and permission granted by discipline leads to invite lecturers and students to participate in the research study.

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Table 2: Number of participants cited

	Number of participants cited with percentage of total who provided follow-up responses		
	Community Education	Social Work	Teacher Education
Lecturers	2 (50%)	3 (50%)	2 (22%)
Students	7 (54%)	3 (100%)	5 (83%)

Data Analysis

Content analysis (Newby, 2014; Robson, 2016) was used to interrogate findings from participants, with each participant group being split by discipline. There was a total of 151 free-text responses to the survey questions from students (Community Education, n=85, Social Work, n=30, Teacher Education, n=36) and 108 from lecturers (Community Education, n=19, Social Work, n=25, Teacher Education, n=64). We remained acutely aware of our positionality, particularly as two researchers also teach on the programmes under investigation and sought to ensure we curtailed any potential bias in our interpretations of the informants' contributions (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). As well as ensuring ethical practice, this approach enhanced the validity of the analysis, by ensuring a balance of authenticity and consistency (Bitbol & Petitmengin, 2009). We achieved this by only analysing data relating to programmes outwith our own disciplines, and through cross-checking one another's analysis (again avoiding our own disciplines). Within pairs, we agreed upon important themes, and the whole research team then considered these across all data sets. Table 3 shows the codes used in the content analysis for each theme.

Table 3 Thematic codes developed through content analysis

Overarching theme	Sub-theme level 1	Sub-theme level 2
Alignment of the teaching of values across university and placement contexts	Values as core principles in the curriculum	Discipline / professional values
		Understanding of professional values
		Values in practice
	Improving the teaching of values	Benefits and positives
		Improvements
	Interdisciplinary collaboration	Opportunities to collaborate
	Enacting values on placement	Values in practice
Alignment of personal, professional and university values	Values distinction between beliefs and ethics	Understanding of professional values
	Alignment of university/ professional/personal values	Poor alignment
		Good alignment
	Professional standards	Knowledge of expectations
		Support with dilemmas

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Findings & Discussion

Data analysis, as discussed above, identified three 'golden threads' which were present across multiple participant populations. These were, firstly, the way in which university-based learning and practice-based learning align; secondly the need for values teaching to be embedded across courses as an underlying principle; and finally, the tensions perceived to exist between professional and university values, and similarly, participants' personal and expected professional values.

Values as core principles in the curriculum on professional training programmes

Findings

Student and lecturers from all three disciplines (Community Education (CE), Social Work (SW) and Teacher Education (TE)) thought that values are a core component of the curriculum, for example commenting on values being "threaded throughout all the modules I have taught" (SW lecturer 1) and a similar comment from CE lecturer 1 who described them as being "imbued throughout our programme". Students also recognised the importance of values, for example: "I feel the values have been taught well and implemented from the very beginning… and these are developed on as the course continued" (CE student 1). Some students suggested that there is indeed a values gap, for example a TE student and a CE student both commented on how values were "touched upon", but not "explicitly addressed or taught" (TE student 1), or "only certain members of staff" addressed them (CE student 2). This suggests that there is room for enhancement within programmes to ensure that all students are provided with similar opportunities to discuss and debate values as core principles beyond the core first year module.

Discussion

Studies have examined student skills development from a values-based perspective with a focus upon reflection of core values throughout training programmes (Gluchmanova, 2021; Hill et al., 2022; Mergler & Spooner-Lane, 2012). Whilst many studies have considered a theory/practice gap on professional training programmes, Brennan and King (2022) draw attention to a values gap in the ITE core curriculum and the need to develop student skills to enact their inclusive values in practice.

Improving the teaching of values: Beliefs and professional identity

Findings

Students and lecturers from across the three disciplines recognised the importance of modelling of professional values within the classroom, both in the university context and practicum. We need to consider the ways in which lecturer-led theoretical discussion about values interacts with the student's own values base and with practitioners in the field, with students suggesting that "discussions and debates around…global issues" (CE student 3) and the opportunity for "open discussions in workshops about our own opinions and experiences of Values" (TE student 2) support this. SW and TE participants also offered several suggestions to embed more coherently, values as a core principle in the curriculum, many of which were focused upon opportunities to practise, model, and discuss the importance of values and how to enact them on placement.

Some students suggested greater use of role modelling and learning about real life situations before encountering these in practice, for example writing reports and setting up a classroom (TE student 3).

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Lecturers also recognised this, with SW lecturer 2 commenting on the need for greater exploration of "different ideological positions…still lead to sound value expression…that STILL aligns with professional values. We need to do more work on this to model it for our diverse student body". CE student 4 suggested "having more opportunities that highlight the differences in values that we have might help illustrate how we interpret them differently".

Discussion

If the teaching of values is to be embedded and coherent across university and placement contexts, then the value positioning of placement supervisors/mentors and university lecturers must be addressed explicitly regarding the potential influence on the development of student values in taught modules and via incidental learning on placement (Simonsz et al., 2022; Veugelers, 2000). As discussed earlier, universities must be cognisant of the influences that lead to students' attitudes changing and how these may affect their engagement with professional values (Alfirevic et al., 2021; Reeves, 2018). Perhaps what is also required is explicit teaching and reflection on broader societal issues and how the political aspects of education and being a teacher should permeate both university and placement learning contexts (Simonsz et al., 2022). The findings in this section align with existing studies including Jenset (2020) and Philpott (2014) which examine the role of children's services professionals.

Values learning provides meaningful opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration

Findings

Responses from all three student populations, and from CE lecturers, indicated that meaningful opportunities to work together and collaborate across discipline boundaries occurred. Student responses focused upon the benefits of a shared module, for example learning how to work collaboratively and "maintain integrity and respect for everyone" (TE student 2). Another TE student acknowledged that they had not fully appreciated the importance of the learning gained until they were on placement, while a Community Education student felt that more collaborative learning opportunities would provide opportunities to "learn a bit more about each others' professional values…" (CE student 5).

The value of working collaboratively – shared across disciplines – seemed to be one which presented some challenges to students. TE student 3 commented that "teaching often doesn't involve a lot of working collaboratively", while another commented on their peers' lack of commitment to this beyond the group activities in first year. Finally, CE student 6 also felt that students from across disciplines "should be working together more … understand[ing] other professions may enhance collaborative practice". In learning more about each other's professional values, this would, ideally, lead to increased professional trust and more effective joint working within children's services. Our participants' views suggest that further opportunities to be supported in making explicit links between what is taught in university, and placement experience, should be included in course planning.

Discussion

Having considered the importance of values as a core underpinning principle for these qualifying courses, the findings in this section focused upon the opportunities that values learning may provide for interdisciplinary collaboration. While participants were not asked explicitly whether they felt that values learning and teaching provided them with meaningful opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration,

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participants commented upon the importance of it in their responses and thus was identified by the researchers as a key sub-theme.

Our findings align with Carr's (2011) work on the extent to which teacher values align with professional duties and ethical considerations in increasingly collaborative working contexts. Similarly, Frostenson and Englund (2020) conclude that it is impossible to separate values from professional practice, although Nickel and Crosby (2022) caution that where values and practice differ, this may lead to tension and crisis resulting in colleagues leaving the profession.

Enacting values on placement

Findings

As discussed above, it is difficult to separate fully the learning about values which occurs in the University setting from that which occurs during professional practice and participants recognised how learning in each context is complementary to, and builds on, the other. More specifically, lecturers' responses focused on the way in which values underpin how students are assessed, for example: "it is an essential part of the qualifying programmes and assessments" (SW lecturer 3) and "It sets a benchmark for all students and staff" (TE lecturer 1).

Conversely, students highlighted the way in which theoretical professional values are brought alive and put into practice during placement. For example, one TE student (4) stated that they learned more about values "the longer I spend out on placement". CE and SW students also expressed their views of the benefits of placement, for example being able to continuously see the values in practice (CE student 7) and being able to develop their values "through placement … [has] given me a real life example of my practice outside of lectures" (SW student 1).

Discussion

As discussed by Lovat (2011), learning about, and consideration of, values can bring about holistic benefits for students' development. With that in mind, it can be argued that learning in the university and in professional practice should be more embedded and entwined to support this. Brennan and King (2022) suggest that professional placement has an important role in enabling learners to interrogate their beliefs and apply what they have learned about professional values in real life situations.

Our findings align with Bowman et al.'s (2022) work which suggests that professionals require on-going learning opportunities to make explicit links between their professional values and their teaching. This has implications for university lecturers, particularly course designers, and practicum mentors in ensuring that support and professional learning opportunities focus upon critical reflection regarding development of students' professional values and how they change over the course of the training period. A key aspect of critical reflection is consideration of the extent to which personal, professional and university values align and how balance of alignment may change over time.

Perhaps students need access to the concepts discussed herein as tools to articulate their lived experience of conflict and development of professional identity whilst training (Engelbertink et al., 2022). Values as a core curriculum component with clear learning outcomes could bridge university learning about them and enactment of them on placement. Indeed, Perry et al., (2019, p.19) suggest a "joined-up approach to theory and practice" in general around inclusive principles and a research-informed approach. Increased

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opportunities to explore how personal values are formed may also develop a deeper understanding of how cultural and societal influences shape our belief and value systems, personally and professionally.

Alignment of personal, professional and university values in professional practice

Findings

Several lecturers noted that there was alignment between what was being taught in the University about values and what was contained in professional regulatory bodies' values statements. For example, TE lecturer 2 stated that university values align with a range of educational contexts while CE lecturer 2 noted that University and professional values "map on quite neatly… Mostly". Similarly, SW student 2 felt that professional values were "fundamental" to their practice, and another commented on the way in which the shared first year module had helped them to understand the professional values and "helped us see our values align" (SW student 3). However, some students and lecturers disagreed with this view. For example, TE student 5 commented that "I do not always feel the teaching on the course is relevant to the current trends in the classroom…" and SW student 1 suggested that it "would be helpful to debate values that may clash or cause ethical dilemmas on placement".

The balancing of competing values was found to be problematic for students across the three disciplines. For example, expectations around responses to 'challenging behaviour' from children and young people was one specific area of tension identified by CE and TE students. TE student 4 stated that "values I hadn't considered myself to have previously have come up in teaching situations, specifically behaviour management". Indeed, several students reported that their understanding of the significance and implication of any tensions between these – itself only partially understood in the abstract through class-based teaching – was brought into sharper focus once tested in practice. Lecturers emphasised the need for students to be able to align their values within their placement contexts, as "the modular structure doesn't always help students see the coherence in their learning" (TE lecturer 2). This tension was also acknowledged by students, with TE student 1 asserting that "students have to learn this themselves".

Discussion

Our findings suggest that it may be beneficial for qualifying programmes to ensure that course content reflects current classroom trends and priorities, providing safe spaces for students to debate how their personal and professional values may not align, and how they might manage these situations. It is also important to emphasise to students, as discussed earlier, that there may well be a mismatch between their personal and professional values. For example, Fenton (2016) distinguishes between values as beliefs held by Social Work students and the ethics that guide their professional behaviour, a phenomenon which arguably is relevant across all qualifying programmes. The extent to which students have a sense of agency and autonomy to question and challenge contradictory messages, however, is unclear. Whilst we found some degree of overlap between students' personal and professional values expressed as a commitment to humanistic, person-centred values when working in Children and Family Services, some respondents highlighted how tensions arose throughout their studies, particularly when on placement. Here, staff outlined how students on all three programmes are required to reflect on how their personal and professional values align in the context of their evolving practice.   Interestingly, Ball (2003) refers to 'values schizophrenia' whereby students are conflicted between being an authentic practitioner following their own values and, on the other hand, being inauthentic when being an accountable 'good' one. This may be better understood in the context of neoliberalist educational policies that focus upon measurable outcomes

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and accountability of professionals, including higher education lecturers on professional training programmes, to deliver them (Reeves, 2018, Vieira et al, 2021).

Recommendations

Overarching findings from this study have informed our recommendations.

Firstly, it would be helpful to make more explicit the links between the professional values that underpin teaching and learning at university and on placement. Further, we suggest that professional discussions with colleagues 'in the field' may enable exploration of the extent to which there is a shared understanding of values at university and on placement and how we support student learning about values. Doing so may highlight areas of tension in each context and how they impact on student experience. Similarly, including further opportunities for students and lecturers to discuss the alignment of personal and professional values, and for support to be provided in exploring areas of misalignment, would be beneficial.

Using module and programme enhancements processes we suggest that a mapping exercise might be useful to establish where values are taught, both explicitly and implicitly, and, in turn, identify corresponding tensions or barriers in student learning experiences. We also suggest that further opportunities for students to work together across disciplines, thus mirroring the interdisciplinary working which they will encounter in the workplace, should be built into the curriculum across the whole degree.

Finally, we suggest that future research should be undertaken into how values are taught in children's services qualifying courses, and the impact that this teaching has for children's services professionals both when they are undertaking placement and post-qualifying. A five-year mixed methods longitudinal study, with participants from a range of courses and universities, would allow the exploration of how children's services professionals' perceptions develop and change because of their experience.

Limitations

Several limitations were identified in this study. Firstly, the use of online surveys which, while allowing many potential participants to respond, did not allow us to follow up areas of interest. Had this been followed-up with interviews or focus groups, a deeper understanding of participants' views may have been obtained.

Another limitation was that we collected data from only three qualifying programmes, located within one university. Collecting data from a wider range of children's services qualifying programmes, across several universities, would have been beneficial.

Our own bias and values as insider researchers may have influenced the way in which we wrote survey questions (Fleming, 2018; Greene, 2014) Similarly, we were aware of how this may influence our engagement with the data and so mitigated for this by including cross-checking in the content analysis to ensure trustworthiness of our findings (Creswell, 2013; Trowler, 2011).

Conclusions

This study explored the role of professional values in children's services qualifying courses in community education, social work, and teacher education. The aim was to enhance understanding of the ways in which discrete university values and professional qualifying courses were aligned and drew on values-based pedagogy to incorporate the Professional Standards required by validating bodies. The research reported in

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this paper drew on the qualitative strand of a mixed methods study, considering the views of students and lecturers involved with the full-time undergraduate professional qualifying courses.

Overall, professional values which align with the relevant Professional Standards and the University's values were recognised by those studying and teaching on the department's qualifying children's services courses. Professional values were viewed as an important central tenet of the courses, key tensions were identified between professional and personal values, the dilemmas of values in practice, and scope for enhancement of the alignment between the university values, professional learning, and praxis.

Specific themes also focused upon the need to consider how neoliberal concepts of performativity, accountability and performance management may impact on university values and how they are taught to students who may align their own values with broader societal changes. There is a need to acknowledge the existence and growth of a 'values gap' explicitly on courses. The need to address a praxis gap also emerged from our data. Participants suggested the need for greater coherence across teaching of values at university and how they play out on placement which would enable more bidirectionality in students' learning experiences.

This study provides a foundation for further research in this area, considering the wider range of career-long professional learning courses offered at postgraduate level, and of the wider body of children's services qualifying courses outwith the department.

Biographies

Dianne Cantali is a Senior Lecturer in Teacher Education with twenty-five years' experience as an educator. Dianne is the School Athena Swan gender equality charter mark lead and is an Advance HE Athena Swan panellist. Dianne's research interests are in inclusive education and practice, and teacher education.

Tracey Colville is a lecturer in Educational Psychology. She has over 30 years' experience in education as a teacher, educational psychologist, and lecturer. Tracey's research interests include organisational change processes in educational contexts, application of activity theory as a change process tool, research culture in educational psychology and children's voice.

Martin Purcell is a Lecturer in Youth & Community Work, teaching on undergraduate and postgraduate Community Education courses. Martin's teaching is informed by thirty years' experience as a practitioner in youth work and community development practice in some of the most marginalised, disadvantaged and excluded communities throughout the UK.

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