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# Impact of Scottish vocational qualifications on residential child care: have they fulfilled the promise?

GAVIN HERON & MONO CHAKRABARTI

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**Abstract** *This article will present findings from a doctoral study exploring the impact of ‘SVQ Care: Promoting Independence (level III)’ within children’s homes. The study focuses on the extent to which SVQs enhance practice and their function within a ‘learning society’. A total of 30 staff were selected from seven children’s homes in two different local authority social work departments in Scotland. Each member of staff was interviewed on four separate occasions over a period of 9 months. Interviews were structured using a combination of repertory grids and questions. Particular focus was given to the assessment process, the extent to which SVQs enhance practice and the learning experiences of staff. The findings suggest that there are considerable deficiencies both in terms of the SVQ format and the way in which children’s homes are structured for the assessment of competence. Rather than address the history of failure within residential care, it appears that SVQs have enabled the status quo to be maintained whilst creating an ‘illusion’ of change within a learning society.*

## Introduction

Setting a relevant and recognised qualification for residential child care staff has remained a perennial problem for social work. Whilst the CQSW became the recognised professional qualification for fieldwork, the CSS was not afforded the same status and few residential staff had the opportunity to attain this qualification. Debate over the CQSW and the transition to the more competence-based DipSW related primarily to fieldwork and contrasted with the silence surrounding the low level of qualifications amongst residential staff. In the early 1990s the report by Skinner (1992) endorsed Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) as a preferred method of qualifying basic grade residential child care staff. Although there is a vast array of literature promoting SVQs/NVQs, considerable controversy surrounds the competence-based approach upon which these qualifications were founded. Moreover, few studies have investigated the effectiveness of SVQs within residential child care. This article provides a summary of findings from a doctoral study that attempted to address this deficit by examining the impact of ‘SVQ Care: Promoting Independence (level III)’ within children’s homes.

## Background

Residential child care workers have remained an unqualified sector within social work departments. This situation has not gone unnoticed. For example, the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW, 1992, p. 14) document 'Setting Quality Standards for Residential Child Care' states that:

The historical background against which this Group has been asked to report is one of repeated failure. Readers will not need reminding in detail of the litany of inquiries and reports which have called for more and better training for residential staff (Barr, 1987, lists 50 such reports between 1946 and 1985 alone), and they will be aware of how painfully slow progress has been. The number of residential child care workers without a social work qualification ... must be regarded as an indictment of the record of social work training in the UK.

The report listed a number of recommendations. Recommendation 2 (p. 19, emphasis in original) stated that:

**The Group recommends that all residential child care workers should hold a professional qualification at DipSW level.**

The recommendation to qualify residential child care workers with the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) was seen as a 'minimum standard of qualification' because of the 'exceptionally complex and demanding nature of residential child care' (p. 19). Attaining the DipSW would, therefore, provide the basis for a 'depth of understanding and breadth of vision required to produce an adequate level of critical reflective practice' (p. 19).

The recommendation to adopt the DipSW as a minimum qualification was overshadowed by the Skinner report (1992), which gave official endorsement for SVQs as a method of qualifying residential child care workers. The report provided a comprehensive review of residential child care and reaffirmed the need to address the low level of qualifications held by staff. The aim was to provide residential workers with a level of training on a 'platform for the sustained progress that is required' (p. 71). The value of SVQs, according to the report, is that they enable staff 'to develop along a continuum ... and enhance the quality of services and career structure of the work force' (p. 73). Although the report was crucial in promoting SVQs within residential child care, it offered no significant analysis of the competence-based approach and accepted SVQs without any apparent evidence regarding their effectiveness.

Social work departments have differed in their implementation of SVQs. Some departments, according to Kent (1997, p. 60), 'have invested heavily in the HNC while others have concentrated on the SVQ alone'. For other departments, the HNC and SVQ level 3 are the minimum requirements deemed necessary for candidates to be recognised as qualified residential workers (1997). According to Kent, there appears to be a significant degree of controversy amongst employers regarding both the value of training and the process of assessing workers as competent. For Hyland (1994, in introduction):

One of the most worrying aspects of all this is the fact that the relatively few critical studies of NVQs are almost totally overshadowed by the massive public relations exercise mounted by the NCVQ and its supporters ...

This article explores the perceptions of staff towards SVQs and their experiences of integrating this competence-based vocational qualification within children's homes.

## Competence-based qualifications: evidence for and against

Whilst vocational education and training existed long before the emergence of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ), it attracted little public or political interest and was marginal to mainstream education (Gleeson, 1990). Allegations of a 'skills gap' and failure of the conventional curriculum in the 1980s (e.g. Skilbeck *et al.*, 1994) underpinned the drive towards the 'new vocationalism'. This new approach focussed initially on young people with initiatives such as the Youth Training Scheme (YTS). In the 1990s it widened to include adults and re-entrants to the workforce. The government aimed to transform Britain into a 'learning society' (Gokulsing *et al.*, 1996). The shift from a more traditional academic paradigm towards a competence-based structure was a key determinant of the new vocational qualifications.

### *Evidence supporting SVQs*

Support for SVQs has been evidenced in a wide variety of work environments. In a 'Review of 100 NVQs and SVQs' the Beaumont report (1995, p. 10) 'found widespread support for the NVQ/SVQ concept of work-based qualifications'. Although there have been various problems with their implementation, the report states that NVQs/SVQs provide opportunities for personal development and have the potential to create 'a well-trained, flexible and competent workforce necessary for the UK to compete internationally' (p. 10). Toye and Vigor (1994) examined the implementation of NVQs within 15 large employers and also found widespread support for the NVQs. The main criticisms of the NVQs/SVQs related to: the unnecessary use of 'jargon' and excessive 'paperwork'; and that they were more suited to newcomers than experienced workers. A study that focussed specifically on social care workers (Sargeant, 2000) showed higher levels of self-efficacy amongst those who had experience of the NVQ system. These workers had a better appreciation of good practice and were more willing to challenge practice not consistent with the values and principles established within the NVQs. These studies suggest that the NVQs/SVQs are highly beneficial and that any limitations can be addressed in order to make the system more effective.

Despite the evidence supporting SVQs, important questions about the value of the approach, especially in relation to learning, remain unanswered. In particular, if SVQs are based on assessment and are 'independent' of any 'mode of learning' (NCVQ, 1988, p. v) then how can they help create the 'autonomous learner' (Jessup, 1991) or 'encourage progression and access to further learning'? (*Workplace Assessor's Manual*, 1994, p. 1). A central aim of this study was to explore what the process of assessment involved and what impact it has on practice? In particular, it is unclear if the assessment procedure undertaken by candidates involves them learning anything new, or merely demonstrating what they already do in practice.

### *A problem of definition*

The lack of clarity surrounding the assessment process is compounded by the confusion over what 'competence' actually means. The NCVQ (1988/89, quoted in Fletcher, 1991, p. 32) produced a broader definition that tries to merge the person-centred notion of competence with work-related notions of competence:

competence is a wide concept which embodies the ability to transfer skills and knowledge to new situations within the occupational area. It encompasses organisation and planning of work, innovation and coping with non-routine activities. It

includes those qualities of personal effectiveness that are required in the workplace to deal with co-workers, managers and customers.

Such 'all encompassing' definitions have, however, been criticised for being too vague. For Woodruffe (1991) the existing vagueness of competence suggests it could mean almost anything. Within the field of social work, such vagueness may be particularly problematic. When examining the meaning of competence in the HNC (Social Care), Chakrabarti and Connelly (1997) believed the government definitions of competence produced 'a range of difficulties about its logical status'. Confusion centres on the extent to which competence is (Chakrabarti & Connelly, p. 287):

composed just of pieces of behaviour or actions? Or, is it a particular outcome of behaviour which is the focus of a competence—an overall product, irrespective of the details of how it was arrived at?

For Hyland (1994), despite the 'positive overtones' in everyday usage of the term competence, it is imbued with meaning associated with the 'lowest common denominator', such as, 'sufficient', 'adequate' and 'suitable'. These overtones, in which competence refers to a minimal or basic level of performance, clearly contrast with the 'excellence' promoted within SVQs. Hyland believes that the potency of competence as a term is derived not so much from competence, but rather the desire not to be seen as 'incompetent'. This may be particularly significant in understanding the rapid expansion of the competence-based approach in social work, especially in residential child care where increasing public attention surrounding the numerous scandals such as 'Pindown' (Levy & Kahan, 1991) coincided with various government reports (e.g. Utting, 1991; Skinner, 1992). From Hyland's perspective, the combination of an unqualified workforce and the scandals in residential child care would make 'competence' a persuasive solution to the problem.

#### *A critique of competence-based qualifications for social work*

The competence-based approach is located in two theoretical orientations: behaviourism and functional analysis (e.g. Clarke, 1995) and criticisms have tended to relate primarily to the DipSW, with much less focus on SVQs. Given that both qualifications are influenced by competence-based education, many criticisms levelled at the Diploma are equally relevant to SVQs. However, it is important to recognise that there are fundamental differences in the way these qualifications are designed and implemented. The competence-based approach within social work has been criticised on five key areas.

1. The competence-based approach is reductionist in that the fragmentation of complex tasks and judgements are confined to a narrow assessment process which focuses primarily on observable behaviours relating to specific criteria (Dominelli, 1996).
2. The process of reflection has been narrowed to a 'tick-box' exercise, whereby students focus disproportionately on identifying work simply in order to produce the necessary evidence for each unit of competence (Cannan, 1995).
3. The mechanistic and impersonal implementation of behaviourism and functional analysis denies practitioners the necessary autonomy when responding to the often complex issues affecting clients' lives (Chown & Last, 1993).
4. The competence-based approach demotes student learning. This criticism refers to the skewed focus on 'outcomes', with the actual process of learning becoming of secondary importance (Davies & Durkin, 1991). The effectiveness of student learning becomes

measured in terms of the number of people passed through the system instead of the nature and quality of their experience (de Maria, 1992).

5. The competence-based approach is oppressive because of its inherent individualistic and technocratic rationale which serves to perpetuate oppressive structural inequalities (Issitt, 1995). Instead of linking the complex and varying aspects of oppression and discrimination that permeate organisations and institutions, the competence-based approach focuses on the 'individual' worker and the 'individual' client (Issitt, 1995).

Essentially, these criticisms of the competence-based approach reflect a method of de-skilling certain sectors of the work force through the fragmentation and routinisation of certain tasks (e.g. Cannan, 1995; Clarke, 1995; Jones, 1996; Dominelli, 1996). From this perspective, any attempt to address some of the limitations in design or difficulties in implementation of SVQs is problematic because the entire system is fundamentally flawed.

### **Study design**

The study focused on three areas: staff perceptions of SVQs; the residential context; and the views of staff towards the children. This article presents those findings primarily in relation to the staff's perceptions of SVQs and the impact they had on practice.

Data for the study was collected from interviews with residential staff. A total of 30 staff were interviewed from seven children's homes in two different local authorities. At the beginning of the study: 17 staff were in the process of doing SVQs; five staff had completed SVQs; and five staff were not involved in SVQ. In addition to these groups, three workers qualified with the DipSW participated in the study. Two of them were workplace assessors for SVQs, and the other had completed SVQs prior to gaining the DipSW. It was hoped that these workers might provide additional insights into SVQs.<sup>1</sup> By the end of the study another three workers had commenced the SVQs and another eight workers had completed them.

#### *Interview schedule*

The intention was to interview each member of staff on four separate occasions. Data was collected from two phases of interviews separated by a period of approximately 9 months.<sup>2</sup> In each interview phase, workers were visited on two occasions, separated by a period of approximately 3 weeks. The benefit of a follow-up phase of interviews was that it allowed for two 'snapshots' of workers' experiences. Of the 120 interviews originally planned, 109 interviews were completed.<sup>3</sup> The interviews were recorded (audio) and transcripts were analysed. The duration of interviews ranged from 50 minutes to 1 hour and 45 minutes.

Interviews were structured using a combination of questions and repertory grids. The two main questions asked were:

- (1) What is your opinion of SVQs?
- (2) Do you think you have learned, or, will learn anything from doing SVQs?

The first question, which was more general, would hopefully allow the staff to express their views about SVQs. The second question was more specific and was intended to explore any learning that might arise from the SVQ assessment process.

Although each of the questions would provide useful information, it was hoped that responses by staff would provoke further questions, primarily with the purpose of clarifying initial responses. For example, if someone's reply to question (1) was, 'I don't like SVQs', the worker would be asked to explain 'why' they did not like SVQs and to give

an example of 'what' exactly they did not like about them. Similarly, if a reply to question (2) was 'yes', the worker would then be asked 'what' they had learned and were requested to give an example of how the learning related to their practice. Alternatively, if someone replied 'no' to question (2), the worker would be asked 'why' they might not have learned anything. The aim of using such questions was to elicit workers' views on the actual process of 'doing' SVQs, and in particular, to what extent it linked to a 'continuum' of learning.

In addition to these questions, the Role Construct Repertory Test (Kelly, 1955), commonly referred to as the repertory grid or 'regrid', was used. The regrid is a technique used to structure interviews. Two different regrid were adapted to explore: (1) the perceptions staff have of children; and (2) the context in which staff are assessed for SVQs. Staff were also asked specific questions about their experience of SVQs. Although there are many ways to analyse data from regrid, this study focussed primarily on the conversations generated by staff when compiling the regrid. This is consistent with Kelly's philosophy (Phillips, 1989) and avoids many of the flaws identified by Yorke (1985) in relation to the validity of the regrid as a technique. The value of the regrid for this study was in providing 'the researcher with an abundance and a richness of interpretable material' (Cohen & Manion, 1997, p. 309).

Given the exploratory nature of the study, a qualitative method of analysis was adopted. The transcripts were analysed into themes and sub-themes that reflected the main issues raised by staff during the interviews. In order to convey the perceptions of staff, extracts from the transcripts have been cited.

### *Limitations of the study design*

In attempting to examine the impact of SVQs, it was also important to recognise that simply identifying different cohorts within a longitudinal study was problematic. Workers were at different stages of SVQs, their length of experience in residential care varied and some had a relevant HNC. There are also ongoing influences within a residential environment that need to be taken into consideration. Factors such as morale and enthusiasm, working within a team and different management styles need to be considered in any attempt to examine how SVQs might impact on practice. When considering such factors, it was clear that there were many influences that could not be predicted (e.g. variations in individual motivations and abilities, staff absence, influences of other training courses) let alone be 'controlled' in any precise way.

## **Results**

The majority of staff were almost entirely negative about SVQs. That is, they had virtually nothing positive to say about SVQs in terms of their own experience. Not all the staff, however, expressed such negative views. Although every single worker expressed some significant criticism about SVQs, several workers also identified strongly with certain positive features, and several staff identified a range of both positive and negative features.

From the responses given by workers, a range of themes emerged which were categorised as:

- degree of new learning;
- increased levels of awareness;
- an over-emphasis on written work;
- repetition involved in evidencing performance criteria;



- the irrelevance of jargon to practice; and
- the significance of support.

Although many aspects of these categories are inter-related, each will be considered separately in an attempt to enhance clarity surrounding the staff's perceptions of SVQs.

### *Degree of new learning*

Workers' experiences of SVQs, specific to their learning, varied considerably. The majority of staff did not believe they had learned anything new and several were uncertain about their learning experiences. Generally, staff did not believe SVQs made any significant difference to their practice.

I'm not quite sure of their value to be quite honest with you. They go into minute detail and a lot of it is common sense. I'm not sure what it's going to achieve. I mean this is my personal view all right, but you know workers and what they're like before they do SVQs and afterwards, there's no difference in their work practice. I think you'll learn something; what, I don't really know.

A minority of staff did believe they had learned something new from undertaking SVQs. The main areas cited by these staff were 'legislation', 'policies and procedures' and 'discrimination'.

I think the SVQs are worthwhile ... To say you can do the job, or revisit certain practicalities. It's good for the legalities, checking out the correct legislation.

When asked to give an example of how SVQs had helped the practicalities, these workers were usually less certain. For example, when asked about the 'legalities', the worker cited above said:

I would say there's many things that I've learned ... There's nothing that jumps out. The INSET was useful because you mixed with people from different settings, elderly and that. It was good to discuss things and listen to other people's point of view.

Although the worker gave no definite examples of any actual learning, he appears to associate learning with the INSET (In Service Education and Training) programme, especially discussions with other workers, rather than anything specific to SVQs. Given he had completed the INSET programme over a year ago, it is perhaps not surprising his recollections may be rather vague. However, there was no evidence from the worker's comments that more recent learning had occurred. This worker's response was not uncommon; several of the staff who initially stated SVQs had helped them learn, were unsure about the precise nature of that learning.

Workers undertaking SVQs and those who had completed them often stated that many aspects of what they were expected to write in their logs was quite demeaning or trivial. A worker who had completed the SVQ programme highlights this point:

They're spending a lot of money, and there's the time it takes people to do, and people hate it. Writing logs, total rubbish ... For the Health and Safety log, I wrote about making a cheese and onion toastie and how people had to be careful because the oven is hot. I'm a mother for Christ sake. How stupid do they think I am. Writing logs about emptying bins. It's an insult.

Essentially, SVQs did not help workers deal with what they considered to be the most important aspects of practice. The most commonly cited areas were the excessive levels of violence and the inadequate resources available. Rather than deal with these issues, SVQs focused on what they considered trivial.

The belief by the majority of staff that SVQs did not provide any new learning is not necessarily a weakness of SVQs, as they are, as previously noted, 'independent' of learning or training programmes. This strategy may, however, have certain unintended consequences. In particular, it might explain why so many workers expressed such negative views towards SVQs. The remaining themes provide an insight into other aspects of SVQs and highlight some of the implications of making them 'independent' from learning.

### *Increased levels of awareness*

All of the workers who made positive comments about SVQs referred to increased levels of awareness. In fact, the potential to increase awareness was the most positive feature of SVQs. Workers did differentiate between 'awareness' and 'learning'. Becoming more conscious of what they may have already known, but were doing instinctively, or had forgotten, was generally viewed as raising awareness. Alternatively, learning was more associated with 'finding out' or 'knowing something' that had not been known or previously understood.

The increased awareness was generally attributed to writing logs:

It makes you think about the things that you do. Because there are some things that you do instinctively ... but you just don't think about it, you don't realise it, or you've just not had the time to think about it. When it comes to writing in your log, it makes you think about your practice.

Raising awareness, however, was not a constant experience for staff. Instead, any awareness about practice tended to be characterised by 'peaks' and 'troughs', which tended primarily to reflect the motivation of individuals toward their SVQs. Motivation tended to decline after the first few months. Whilst this may be a common factor to many training programmes there was, however, a particular factor unique to SVQs.

When evidencing competence, workers tended to search for the necessary performance criteria (PCs). The starting point was not practice, but rather, the performance criteria. Situations or events were not analysed and understood in terms of practice, and then evaluated in order to determine if they provide a relevant performance criteria. Instead, the required performance criteria tended to be at the forefront of the worker's thoughts, and awareness was related to the degree to which an event, incident or situation had the potential for evidencing a performance criteria listed in the *Workplace Assessor's Manual* (commonly referred to as the WAM book). This tendency for prioritising performance criteria over practice was not unnoticed by workers:

I've seen people doing the SVQ actually looking for things during their shift; oh I need this PC. All you should be doing during the shift is caring for the young folk. Looking about for PCs just gets in the way.

Awareness then, on occasion, may be more related to searching for performance criteria than understanding the actual practice. This may explain, to some extent, why many workers did not believe SVQs made any significant difference to their practice.

### *An over-emphasis on written work*

The belief that SVQs placed too much emphasis on writing was a recurring theme.

Too much emphasis is placed on written skills, and people good at writing are not necessarily the ones with the best practice.

Staff did not believe writing to be unimportant, or a skill that they need not develop. What concerned most staff was the importance attributed to written work over actual practice. Essentially, staff believed it was their writing skills that were being assessed, rather than their practice.

Of particular concern was that the written work for SVQs did not accurately reflect practice.

It does make you think about your practice. But it's easy to lie doing it. I remember at the INSET, people copying each other ... Anybody could cheat, especially if you can write well.

Only a few workers openly admitted to faking logs. When finding it difficult to find the necessary evidence, one such worker stated:

Doing the SVQs really was a trauma. My assessor just told me to be inventive, so I was.

Essentially, many staff stated that the logs used as evidence for SVQs bore little resemblance to practice. The 'gap' between written work submitted for assessment and actual practice raises fundamental questions about the validity of the SVQ assessment procedure. If practice is not reflected in the written work, then what exactly are SVQs assessing in terms of competence?

Despite official attempts to portray SVQs as work-based, many staff experienced them as 'paper exercises', with little relevance for improving practice. The belief that SVQs over-emphasise written work is an important factor, but the claim that SVQs are an exercise may be more related to the difficulty workers have in feeling genuinely involved in their work. For many workers, the reasons for doing SVQs were not related to any internal motivating factors, such as personal gratification, or a desire to further their learning. With so few opportunities for learning, maintaining the necessary motivation for progressing SVQs may be particularly problematic. As a result, 'writing' may be a symptom of that difficulty. Recognising this distinction is not unimportant: reducing the written work involved in SVQs may not resolve the real problem; whereas, dealing with why workers feel SVQs are of little intrinsic value may reduce the problem of 'writing'.

### *Repetition involved in evidencing performance criteria*

The repetition involved in evidencing work to meet the performance criteria was an issue raised by every single worker.

The biggest thing is they're repetitive. There's no need for splitting the sections up and having to evidence certain practice again and again.

The problem of repetition did not appear to subside as workers progressed with SVQs. In fact, for many workers, it became more problematic as PCs became more difficult to 'find'.

Not a single worker gave any merit to the existing way in which the same evidence had to be reproduced within different units of SVQs. Moreover, the repetition was a major factor

underpinning many of the staff's views that SVQs were 'boring'. Yet, most workers strongly believed that the actual areas identified by the criteria were relevant to their work.

It would appear that the process of doing SVQs did not help staff improve their practice. Workers simply evidenced, repeatedly, what they already knew, with no sense of addressing the problems, or difficulties, they were experiencing in their day-to-day work. It may, therefore, be the process of evidencing, rather than the actual number of times the worker performs a certain task, that is crucial. As noted previously, workers searched for PCs to 'fit' the WAM book. Practice was subservient to the process of finding the PCs. Therefore, what is the point of showing something eight times when doing so the first two or three times has no significant relevance for practice?

Reducing the repetition of evidencing within the SVQ format is unlikely to enhance any learning opportunities or understanding of practice, but it will reduce the time and effort required to complete SVQs. Reducing the amount of evidencing from eight to three times, for example, may lessen the time staff spend 'searching' for PCs, but the 'gap' between written work for SVQs and actual practice remains unchanged.

### *The irrelevance of jargon to practice*

A persistent theme commented upon by staff was the 'jargon' in SVQs. Terms such as 'Performance Criteria', 'Range Statements', 'Statements of Knowledge', 'Assessment Specification', were examples of jargon, cited by various workers. In particular, the language was confusing for many workers at the early stages of SVQs. Essentially, many workers did not believe the jargon had any real relevance for their practice. Instead, its relevance was related to the process of evidencing performance criteria.

As an idea, the SVQs may be okay, but in its present form it's no good—far too overcomplicated. The problem for workers is not about how it helps their practice, but rather to do with deciphering the jargon and giving what they think the assessors want to read.

Part of the problem associated with jargon, especially at the early stages of SVQs, could be attributed to workers familiarising themselves with new language and terminology, which is a common feature to many qualifying courses. However, a factor which exacerbated the problem of jargon was the design of the *Workplace Assessor's Manual*. The manual was deemed by the vast majority of staff to be too complicated and confusing. The ability to 'navigate' around the book was, for many workers, the key to doing SVQs. For those who did not fully develop this skill, they often expressed particular frustration about the 'repetition' and 'jargon'. Many workers stated that after a few months they had become more comfortable with the meanings of the terms used. Despite becoming more familiar with the jargon, it was not adopted because it helped to improve practice, but rather it was necessary to use in order to complete the book.

### *The significance of support*

The level of support available when undertaking SVQs was a major issue for workers. In particular, having to do SVQs in their own time was a common criticism.

It's not fair having to work at home ... I really see the need for residential workers to be trained. It's wrong that you can go into residential care without any qualifica-

tions, so I do recognise the need to train workers. But I really think it should be within our existing workload, not in addition to it. I think that's very unfair.

The resentment at using their own personal time was in part related to the fact that the pre-arranged study time was often denied, or delayed, because of priorities emerging within the children's home; staff shortages and disruptive periods were the most common reasons.

Whilst a pre-arranged period of study may be important, it's potential value may be undermined by another crucial factor: feedback. The majority of workers did not believe they got sufficient feedback from assessors when doing SVQs.

We've been really lucky in here. Our manager is good at giving time to do some of the SVQs. But even so, certain folk have been struggling with it. I don't see the value of it, especially when there's no real feedback on it. You don't get feedback.

Staff often felt isolated when writing their logs and believed the assessors did not help them enough to understand certain areas of practice. Log entries were assessed primarily to 'tick off' performance criteria with little emphasis on 'understanding'. That is, meetings between workers and assessors were not used to facilitate discussion, or provide feedback about practice issues, but were performed primarily, and at times almost exclusively, to examine logs against the set performance criteria. A good assessor was, therefore, someone who could help the worker 'around the book' rather than enhance their understanding of practice.

The lack of support may be a significant factor in explaining the overwhelmingly negative views of workers towards SVQs. Whilst increasing the levels of support may reduce the levels of dissatisfaction with SVQs, there remains a fundamental problem. If the assessment process is primarily aimed at getting workers through SVQs rather than assessing actual practice, then it raises questions about the work-based orientation of SVQs.

## **Discussion**

The overwhelmingly negative views expressed by workers provides an insight into their experiences of SVQs. Only a small minority of workers enjoyed doing SVQs and even they expressed some significant criticisms. Of course, it would be misleading to assume that the majority were 'right' simply because their views were most common. Similarly, although the majority of workers did not believe they had learned anything new as a result of undertaking SVQs, this should not be interpreted as a weakness: SVQs are an 'assessment of performance' and the essential 'one key point' according to Fletcher (1991, p. 26), is that 'NVQS have nothing whatsoever to do with training or learning programmes'. Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that most workers did not believe they had learned anything new.

Despite the negative experiences expressed by workers in relation to SVQs, the vast majority were motivated towards enhancing their own learning and development. Staff were often very open about their own limitations as practitioners and frequently cited the lack of training and the stagnation they experienced since entering residential work. The dis-empowered position of staff is unlikely to equate with high levels of morale and it places responsibility on local authorities and central government to move beyond the superficial problems in residential child care.

### *A 'learning society' without learning*

A defining feature of the educational system is the government's ongoing commitment to 'life-long learning' (e.g. The Scottish Credit & Qualifications Framework, 1999). According

to Gokulsing *et al.* (1996) the learning society was to be driven by a 'skills revolution' in which a 'new training culture' would empower individuals to have 'real buying power' within the employment market (p. 5). Given this situation, how do SVQs 'fit' with wider training and educational initiatives? Essentially, SVQs would appear to be in a rather contradictory position with the government's philosophy: within the learning society of the 1990s, a group of workers who have remained predominately unqualified and who undertake one of the most complex and demanding jobs in social work have been given a qualification which excludes learning.

If workers are not given what Apple (1993) termed the 'tools for understanding', then they will be less equipped to integrate aspects of their practice within a more holistic approach and deal with the more complex issues. The reductionist and fragmented nature of SVQs may, therefore, explain why many workers believed they simply dealt with the 'trivial' aspects of work. Reducing complex practice issues to a list of performance criteria was problematic because individuals tended to focus disproportionately on identifying work in order to produce the required evidence. This ritual of searching for performance criteria did not increase levels of understanding.

Even when workers view certain PCs as being relevant, there is no rationale within the assessment process for understanding the complexities of residential work: firstly, there is no learning within SVQs to help workers do so and secondly, each PC is simply 'ticked off' on its own right, without any genuine requirement to integrate the various PCs. Whilst fine-tuning SVQs/NVQs (e.g. Beaumont, 1995) may be appropriate to certain occupations such as hairdressing or plumbing, these adjustments remain within a qualifying paradigm that does not engage with the realities of children's homes. Therefore, despite the technical and work-based orientation of SVQs the gap between the evidence for the PCs and practice is shaped by the inherently fragmented structure of SVQs.

### *A subordinate position*

If a key determinant in the status of a profession or occupation is the ratio of indeterminate to technical knowledge (Jamous & Peloille, 1970), then the overwhelmingly technical nature of SVQs is unlikely to alter the low status of residential child care staff, either in relation to DipSW qualified field workers, or other professions. This situation, using Apple's (1993, 1997) analysis, reflects the ability of the 'power bloc', which in this case is the government and employer-led factions in social work, to marginalise educational interests and exert control over defining the 'official' or legitimate knowledge for the SVQ curriculum. SVQs have enabled the employer-led organisations, with their 'new managerialist' (e.g. Exworthy & Halford, 1999) approach, to increase control over education and training. Under the guise of 'life-long learning', traditional barriers to future education and training are maintained, whilst the social work departments proclaim commitment to equal opportunities policies. Subsequently, SVQs may be creating the illusion of change by qualifying residential staff without significantly altering their subordinate position.

Affording SVQs parity with academic qualifications may create a situation whereby students are ill equipped to cope with the demands of courses such as the DipSW. Research by Chakrabarti and Connelly (1997) indicated that students who accessed the DipSW programme with SVQs and HNC generally required more support, especially with 'academic enquiry skills', than students with more traditional qualifications. Without additional support being given to those students who use SVQs as an entry qualification, a situation is likely to emerge where: (1) the students will not meet the required standard; (2) the standards within the DipSW will decline; or (3) the DipSW will adopt a more

technical approach to match SVQs. Irrespective of whether one, or a combination of these factors prevail, residential staff are unlikely to benefit. The limited new learning experienced by staff in this study would suggest that SVQs reflect a 'dumbing' down of social work education and training. Moreover, the DipSW will continue to be the 'carrot' on the 'continuum' of learning which few residential staff will reach.

### *International comparisons*

Any attempt to make comparisons between SVQs and qualifying systems for residential staff in other countries is complex. For example, there is no unitary framework of residential child care in the UK. Nevertheless, the competency movement within the UK is similar in many respects; this is in fact a defining feature of the SVQ/NVQ approach in establishing common standards. Hence the critique presented in this study may have some relevance to all vocationally based qualifications for residential work in the UK. Comparisons with other European countries are further complicated given the different approaches to welfare and social work. Despite such differences, Crimmens (1998, p. 312) states that: 'The UK appears to lag behind all its comparable European partners in training for residential child care'. For example, Crimmens details a Social Pedagogue model in the Netherlands that provides a 4-year programme for those interested in residential child care. This full-time course incorporates a range of academic subjects and develops relevant skills through teaching in the classroom and practice placements. Comparisons with the European Social Pedagogue or 'Educatuer' programmes lasting from 3 to 4 years would suggest the UK's preference for SVQs/NVQs is a rather minimalist and impoverished approach to qualifying residential child care staff.

### *Maintaining the status quo*

The Regulation of Care Act proposes to establish the Scottish Social Services Council on 1 October 2001. This organisation will be responsible for the registration of staff, including residential child care workers. The qualifications required for registration have not yet been stipulated. Given the ongoing political commitment towards work-based assessment, it is likely that SVQ level 3 will shape, if not dominate, the qualification level for residential child care workers. The evidence in this study would question the validity of incorporating SVQs within any system of registration. The emergence of a new organisation such as the Scottish Social Services Council should be accompanied with debate and openness. To continue with a qualification simply because so much has been invested in it suggests the opposite.

The educational apartheid that exists between field and residential social work rests uneasy within an organisation that proclaims equality of opportunity. How can staff embrace anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practice when they are denied access to appropriate education? The lack of debate surrounding the introduction of SVQs and the subsequent silencing around any rigorous analysis of their effectiveness is a key feature maintaining the status quo in residential child care. As the shift towards a 3-year degree level qualification in social work gains momentum, the existing residential workforce is likely to be left even further behind in a well established two-tier system.

## **Conclusion**

The lack of intrinsic value attributed to SVQs by workers in this study questions the extent to which these qualifications might have any positive impact on practice. Whilst workers

valued the increased awareness, the process of becoming more aware was hindered by the fragmented and reductionist structure of SVQs. Subsequently, making changes to the SVQ format in areas such as written work, use of jargon or lack of support, may fail to address the underlying problem; the irrelevance of SVQs for practice. The lack of evidence supporting the effectiveness of SVQs, the exclusion of learning from the competence-based structure and the lack of consultation with residential staff, questions the very notion of equality of opportunity in social work. There is a need for more research that examines the appropriateness of competence-based vocational qualifications for complex working environments. Meanwhile, any decision to incorporate SVQs within a new system of registration will simply add to the illusion of change in residential child care. This situation has wide ranging implications for those organisations responsible for providing education and training.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Unlike a classroom setting or on more traditional courses, it was not possible to identify a group of workers at the same stage of SVQs.

<sup>2</sup> A time scale of 9 months between each phase of interviews was selected mainly because of the time constraints on the study. Therefore, although workers were expected to complete the SVQ programme in a year, it was hoped that a period of 9 months would be a sufficient time to re-examine their views of SVQs and any impact they might have had on practice. It should be noted however, that the actual duration between the first and second phase of interviews varied from 8 to 11 months. This was due to difficulties in gaining access to staff, usually because of staff absence or annual leave.

<sup>3</sup> Five workers did not complete the second phase of interviews; three were on long-term sick leave (stress related); one was in a car accident; and one terminated his employment. Also, one individual withdrew from the study (no reason was given) after completing the third interview.

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