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# Theory-driven supervision as a method of strengthening the emerging professional identity of social work students

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## *Abstract*

*This article analyses a teaching experiment carried out during a candidate-level (BSW) social work practice-training course. The aim of the experiment was to demonstrate how research and theories intertwine in social work practice, and to produce research-minded social workers with an ability to translate scientific knowledge into practice. The article examines the possibilities and challenges of the teaching experiment and the consequences of the theory experiments on students' emerging professional identity. The data consist of focus-group interviews conducted in 2017–2019 and course feedback. The paper concludes that combining theory and practice in social work practice training does not happen automatically, but students and supervisors need tools for it. The theory experiments strengthened students' professional identity, and gave flexibility and capability in recognizing multiple perspectives in encountered situations.*

## *Keywords*

*Social work practice placements, theory, practice, pragmatism, professional identity.*

## Introduction

The relationship between theory and practice is one of the «eternal discussions» of social work (Sheppard, 1995; Osmond & O'Connor, 2004; Teater, 2017; Miller & Skinner 2013; Muurinen & Kääriäinen, 2020). Claims by both students and practitioners about theories and researched knowledge as something rather distant and irrelevant to be utilized in hectic and complex practice are probably familiar to all social work educators and researchers. With this challenge in our minds, we wanted to elaborate ways to demonstrate to students how research and theories are intertwined in social work practice, and to train reflective and research-minded social workers with an ability to translate scientific knowledge into practice.

In science, the term «theory» is most often defined as a systematic and complex explanatory system based on several concepts (Forte, 2014, p. 47; Fook, 2002, p. 83). «Theory» also refers to universal and unchanging knowledge (Smeeton, 2015, p. 18). Along with theory (theoria), Aristoteles recognized technical knowledge (technê) related to the art of making things and practical knowledge (phronêsis) applied while acting in practice situations (Smeeton, 2015, p. 18). In this article, as well as in the teaching experiment, «theory» is used in a broad sense to refer to scientific concepts, explanatory generalizations and theories (Payne, 2014, p. 5; Muurinen & Kääriäinen, 2020, p. 1201).

Theoretically, we build on pragmatist philosophy. In pragmatism, the key principle is to consider the practical bearings of a conception (Peirce, 1878/1934, p. 258). Thus, pragmatism emphasizes the importance of experiments and practical applications in knowledge production (Peirce, 1905/1934, p. 273; James, 1907/2008, p. 52, pp. 59-60; Dewey, 1920/1988, p. 169). According to John Dewey (1920/1988, p. 163), theories are tools. This means that theory's ability to create understanding of a situation or remove a specific trouble enables testing whether the theory is reliable knowledge or not (Dewey, 1920/1988, p. 169). Dewey (1920/1988, p. 163) also emphasized that all notions and theories should be considered merely hypotheses. This requires that we remain open for observations, which can either confirm or contradict the theory (Dewey, 1920/1988).

The pedagogical foundation of the teaching experiment is in dialogical learning (Paavola & Hakkarainen, 2005; Paavola et al., 2011; Paavola, Engeström, & Hakkarainen, 2012). The dialogical approach to professional expertise contains three central areas of learning: 1) learning as an individual process of gaining knowledge; 2) learning as participating and growing as a member of community action, and 3) learning as conscious knowledge production (Hakkarainen, 2008; Paavola et al., 2011).

Based on our experiences of piloting theory-driven supervision for social work professionals (Muurinen & Kääriäinen, 2020, 2022), we developed a teaching experiment aiming at facilitating students' learning to combine social work theory and practice. Our basic claim is that combining theory and practice in social work studies does not happen by itself, but it can and must be supported by specific pedagogic methods. In this article we describe one teaching experiment aiming at that goal and analyse its results.

The data used in the analysis comprise transcriptions from focus groups conducted with students and small group teachers during two academic years in 2017-2019, as well as course feedback by students. We ask: 1) What are the possibilities of the teaching experiment for students' learning? 2) What were the challenges of the teaching experiment? 3) What consequences has the experiment had on students' emerging professional identity?

## **Previous research on combining theory and practice in social work teaching**

In practice teaching, reflective techniques such as case studies, scenarios and writing exercises can be used to support integration of theory and practice (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018; Sieminski & Seden, 2011). Tutors, for example, discuss the role of theories in practice with the students or, to support conscious application of theories to practice, a practice tutor created a game in which the students are shown a flash card of different theories they are asked to use to reflect their practice experience (Sieminski & Seden, 2011). Lesser and Cooper (2006) created an integrative model linking class and field. They used practice classes as laboratories, in which social work students examined theories as applied to social work practice through various types of assignments, role plays and class discussions with a goal to make theories guide the students' intervention with clients in the field (Lesser & Cooper, 2006).

Teachers have found strategies to bridge the gap between academic learning and professional practice, for example in the work-integrated learning (WIL) approach that helps to develop a reflective practice for students' professional identity formation (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018). According to Bruno and Dell'Aversana (2018), the WIL approach helps students to connect three dimensions of professional identity — professional expertise, membership in a professional community, and sense of professional self. When students reflect on their own professional identity, as well as theories and values of social work, it can help them deal with complex workplace issues.

In order to show social work students how theory and practice relate to each other, social work educators in Scotland developed the «Theory Circle model». This model is used to facilitate reflective discussions with trained practice teachers and students. In the model, students first create a service user profile by drawing a stick person of the service user they are working with and write down significant information of the situation. Second, they reflect on theories that explain the client's situation (theories to inform) and then proceed to reflect on how to act (theories to intervene). Finally, the students are also asked to reflect on the values that underpin the theories. The model has been used within supervision discussion with practice teachers, but students have also reflected on and visualized their thinking with the service user (Collingwood, Emod, & Woodward, 2008).

According to a study concerning the Theory Circle Model, the model supported the students' thinking and improved their ability to articulate. Reflecting on theories widened the students' understanding of the service user's situation and enabled consideration between possible theoretical explanations. Reflecting on one's values was also significant, and the model provided a vehicle for the examination. Applying the model also emphasized to students the importance of gathering information before the interventions (Collingwood, Emod, & Woodward, 2008).

Teaching that supports the integration of theory and practice has also been developed in classroom courses not related to internships and clinical training. By combining teaching on social work theories to case application, the connection between theory and practice can be demonstrated to students. It seems that even short courses like this can support the students' confidence to apply theories and be theory minded (Miller & Skinner, 2013).

## The teaching experiment

In Finland, social work education consists of a three-year candidate (BSW) degree and a two-year master's degree. We realized the teaching experiment as a part of a candidate-level course *Social work professionalism and practice skills* (15 ECTS credits) in the University of Helsinki. This practice course is conducted in the third year of candidate studies, and in the curriculum of years 2017-2020 it was the only obligatory practice placement within social work studies. The course consists of lectures (33 hours), small group meetings supervised by a university teacher (24 hours), a practice placement supervised by a social worker trained as a practice teacher (250 hours), and two written assignments.

One of the expected learning outcomes of the course is that the student has acquired a readiness to combine theory and practice in social work. According to the student feedback of earlier years, though, part of the students felt that the contact teaching in the seminars and small groups remained rather distant from the learning of practical skills that happens in practice placement. The teaching experiment was introduced partly to overcome this challenge, to help students bridge different dimensions of the course and give them an experience of using theory as a tool in practical work.

When planning the teaching experiment, we took the Practice and Theory groups developed for supervision of social work professionals as a starting point. Aino Kääriäinen and Heidi Muurinen have described these groups in both a scientific article (Muurinen & Kääriäinen, 2020) and a practical guide to the use of the supervision method (Kääriäinen & Muurinen, 2019).

The teaching experiment was introduced to the students in the starting seminar of the course, and instructions on the method as well as six one-sheet-long summaries of optional theories pre-chosen by us were distributed to them via an online teaching platform. The theories included e.g. Goffman's idea of facework, Latour's actor-network

theory, dialogical interaction, and narrative approaches. Similarly with the Practice and Theory groups for professionals, we used four criteria in the selection of theories: 1) relevancy; 2) applicability; 3) width; 4) our familiarity of the research (see Muurinen & Kääriäinen, 2022). Additionally, we wanted at least some of the selected theories to be familiar to the students from their earlier studies, and all of them to be easily applicable to the everyday happenings of their diverse practice places. One more important selection criteria was that all the theories somehow touched upon human interaction in a way which we understood to be relevant for social work settings. Nevertheless, our starting point was that what was most important is not the experimented theory as such or what kind of theories are chosen, but that students learn the meta-skill of looking at the practice through different theoretical lenses.

After the joint introduction, the work on theories took place mainly in small groups and practice placements. In the small groups each consisting of 5-7 students and a university teacher, students chose collaboratively which of the theories they wanted to experiment with. After this, they left for the practice placements with the instruction to apply these «theoretical lenses» to the situations and happenings they encountered there. During each of the rounds, students were asked to reflect on what experimenting with the theory felt like, whether they found connections between the theory and the social work done in their practice placement agencies, what the work with clients looked like in the light of the given theory, and what new things did they learn and understand. After approximately 3-4 weeks, students returned to the small group and discussed their experiences and the new insights that the theories had potentially proven to them. This cycle was repeated four times, which meant that each of the small groups experimented with four different theoretical lenses.

Based on the first year's experiences, we made some changes to the method for the second year. First, we as teachers made the selection of theories for the students beforehand instead of letting the students choose from a number of possible theories. These theories were Kirsi Juhila's (2006) typology of social worker-client relationships, Erving Goffman's (1955) idea of facework, and the conceptualization of culturally defined expectation of having-to in Finnish social work (Juvonen, 2014). Second, we reserved 30-45 minutes for introduction to each of the theories in the seminars by the responsible teacher, and added further readings to the online platform. These changes were made to ensure that all students receive a sufficient introduction to each of the theories. Third, the number of theories was reduced to three in order to have enough time for each of them.

## Data and analysis

This study is based on data produced from two different academic years and two rounds of the teaching experiment, between which the method was slightly developed,

as described above. When introducing the teaching experiment, we told the students about the university pedagogical research that we were conducting, and asked for written research permits from them. Students were informed that participation in the study was voluntary and that the decision to participate or not, or the opinions expressed by them about the study or during it, would not affect their studies in any way. In 2017, 90 per cent of the student participants in the course agreed to participate in the study. In 2018, the percentage was 76. Altogether 65 students participated in the teaching experiment because it was part of the course, but the materials produced by those nine students, who did not give their consent, were not used as data in this study.

At the end of the course after the grades were given, we contacted those students who had agreed to participate with a request to join a focus group discussion on the teaching experiment. In spring 2018, we organized two focus groups with altogether 5 students, and in spring 2019, one focus group with 3 participants. Organizing the focus groups was not easy because of the students' demanding timetables, and not all the students who were interested in participation could find time to attend the focus groups. In addition, we had earlier organized two focus groups with the small group teachers: one in autumn 2017, another in autumn 2018 with 4 participants in each of them. The small group teachers had signed similar consent forms as the students. In the focus group discussions we were interested in students' and small group teachers' experiences on the teaching experiment, challenges in using the method, suggestions for further development, and consequences of the teaching experiment to students' learning. The data from these altogether five focus group discussions was transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data comprise 73 pages.

Additionally, students' course feedback and concluding essays written at the end of the course were used as supportive data. This data comprise 43 feedback forms and 43 essays from December 2017 and 13 feedback forms from December 2018.

In analysing the data, we used thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006) and researcher triangulation (Yin, 2009). Students' and small group teachers' interviews were first coded separately. First, all three researchers familiarized themselves with the data and then created initial codes for the relevant extracts. We ended up with 149 data extracts. Of the coded extracts, sub-themes were combined. At this stage, we compared our analysis and reviewed the codes created by each other.

After comparing and merging some of the sub-themes, we had a total of 18 sub-themes. Of these, we formed three overarching themes: 1) the possibilities of the teaching experiment for students' learning; 2) the challenges of the teaching experiment; 3) the consequences for students' emerging professional identity. These overarching themes are also reflected in the research questions that we ask in this study.

Next, we will present the results regarding the possibilities and challenges of the teaching experiment, and its consequences for students' emerging professional identity. In the results we present samples of the data that support our interpretation.

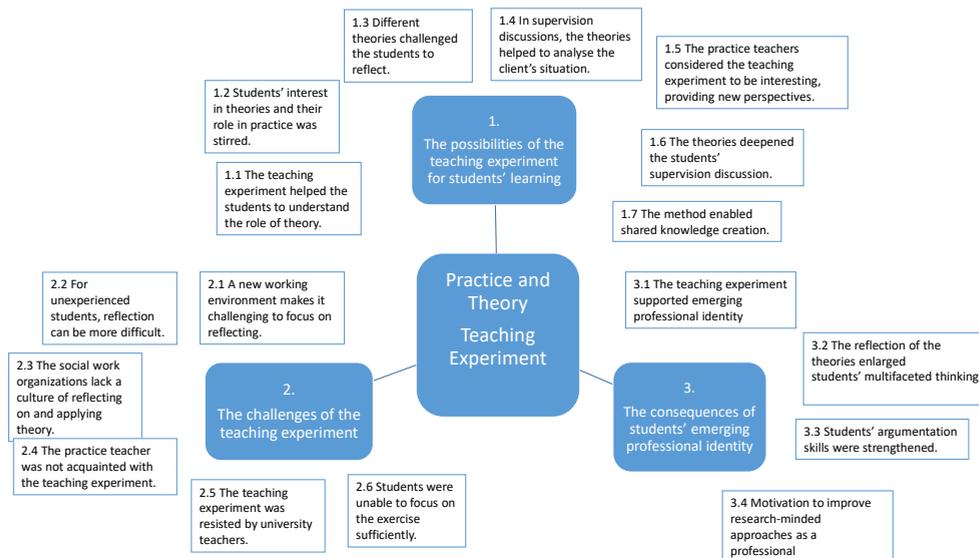


Figure 1. Overarching themes and sub-themes.

## Possibilities of the teaching experiment for students' learning

The data show that the teaching experiment helped the students to understand the role of theories, and students' interest in theories and their role in practice was awakened. Students said that they learned more when they used the theories to reflect on what they observed in the practice placements. The experiment enabled reflections and discussion on the role of theories in practice. As we had hoped for when planning the teaching experiment, the Practice and Theory method seemed to bring theories and practice closer together. As teachers, we considered that it is not of great importance which concrete theories are used in the experiment, but based on student's opinions, theories concentrating on interaction have been a good choice.

Combining theory and practice was well prepared, and it was motivating to go to the practice to reflect on and experiment with the topics that had been discussed in the seminars and small groups. [...] Earlier I considered that social work theory was a bit distant from practical work, and therefore using different theoretical lenses was in this respect eye opening. During the studies, we have gone through many social science theories, which of course form the whole basis of social work and understanding it. However, I found these theories that we discussed in the small groups were very useful and exactly something that I had needed in practical work [student essay].

An important feedback was also that students did not abandon the theories after each round of the experiment, but continued to use them to also reflect on the practice

later on during the course. Some students also used the theories in their written assignments, namely concluding essays and analyses of client cases.

Students described in the focus groups that the theories challenged them to seek for more perspectives from which to observe the happenings in the workplaces and to work with clients:

Somehow I observed the practice and work with service users from different perspectives. Without those theories... I wouldn't have independently searched for all these perspectives. So, well, I think it supported my learning most of all [student in a focus group].

Another student described how they used one of the theories to understand the interaction and social relations on an emergency home visit. The student and their practical teacher used Goffman's facework to understand what happens when social workers go to someone's homes unexpectedly, and how social workers can act in a vulnerable situation, letting the service user keep face.

Moreover, different theories challenged the students to reflect. Students reported that discussions on the theories changed their ways of thinking, and theories helped them to critically reflect on the work done in their practice places and to bring up difficult issues:

Afterwards I think that those theories worked well in bringing up issues. The kind of issues that were bothering me related to practices which, in my opinion, did not go as they should by the book, you know. Good ways to bring up these issues are needed, because otherwise it could be considered an unnecessary critique which could be taken personally [student in a focus group].

On the other hand, the teaching experiment also revealed differences in students' capacity to reflect on theory. Some of the newcomer students tried to apply theories quite technically, more as working methods than as tools for their own thinking, understanding and reflection. At best, discussions on theories helped students to get new perspectives on how to use theories:

I felt that most of the theories did not give me any concrete tools for working and finally I started to lose faith with combining theory and practice. Anyhow, in one of the small group meetings, we discussed that almost no one had got anything from the chosen theory. We continued reflecting on the role of theories in social work. In the joint discussion we realized that the theories should not be understood only as one-sided tools or methods to be utilized in work, but rather as tools for understanding. Theories can help the social worker understand and analyse the service user's situation from different angles. This is how my own practice teachers described their use of theories, too. They gave an example of crisis work in which knowledge about different kinds of defences helped to understand why service users acted as they did in certain situations [student essay].

Some theories required a capability from students to apply them to a completely different context. Students described that it was hard in the beginning, but at least part of them succeeded quite well. Here, one of the students describes how he first doubted whether one of the theories would be applicable in family counselling and family social work, but then learned to recognize talk about «having-to» in dialogical practice mainly oriented at supporting and counselling parents who contact the agency voluntarily:

Then I started to think about it more broadly, to think, for example, about expectations and requirements for parenthood. We reflected with my practice teachers that many parents here have really deeply rooted ideas about what makes «a good parent» and they felt really bad when they felt that they are not good enough. So although it [applying this theory] was hard in the beginning, it opened up a whole lot of new things [student in a focus group].

As hinted in the citation above, students were also encouraged to discuss the theories with their practice teachers, i.e. social workers that were supervising them in the field. Not everyone did that for reasons that we will discuss in the next section, but those who did felt that in supervision discussions, the theories helped to analyse the service user's situation and seek for new perspectives. Joint discussions both made theories more understandable and lowered the threshold to use theory in practical settings:

My practice teachers found the Käyte assignments meaningful, and taking them as a part of the supervisory discussions helped to diversify the analysis of client cases. Theoretical considerations, which were felt to be hard in the beginning, became more comprehensible when discussing with others both in small groups and with practice teachers. It was insightful to notice that combining theory and practice did not need to be a heavy process, but one can pick parts of each theory that suit one's own work [student essay].

Similarly, those practice teachers who got in touch with the method, considered the teaching experiment to be interesting and provided new perspectives to their work. Practice teachers found the discussions on theories fruitful and giving. We do not have data directly from the practice teachers in this study, but students and small group teachers shared some experiences of practice teachers with us in the focus groups:

My practice teacher was super happy, (s)he was maybe even more enthusiastic about this than I was [giving a laugh]. (S)he fingered the papers and had made highlights on them and everything... Somehow it might indicate that these child welfare professionals in the practical working life have a need and an interest in this kind of theoretical working [student in a focus group].

We also learned that practice teachers were interested in getting to know more about the teaching experiment and theories. The teaching experiment was introduced to them in introductory meetings at the beginning of the course, but this is obviously an element that could be developed more. At its best, getting in touch with fresh theories used in the

university and new theoretical perspectives to one's own work serves as a motivation for a social worker to attend the practice teacher course and to supervise students. In some workplaces, practice teachers even brought theories into discussion with other team members in team meetings, and thus the whole work community benefitted from the presence of the student and the Practice and Theory method that was being experimented with.

Our data also show that a practice teacher interested in theories supported students' learning. Those students who discussed theories with their practice teachers reported that the theories helped to deepen the supervision discussions with the practice teacher. As anticipated in the theory on dialogical learning, the exercises enabled shared knowledge creation. The roles of a student and a practice teacher altered when students had more expertise about a given theory and they familiarized the practice teacher with their expertise.

In the classroom environment, discussions on theories were useful especially for those small groups that consisted of less talkative students and the small group teacher had to struggle to keep the discussions lively. Theories and students' experiences of experimenting with them served as a starting point for reflective discussions on client cases, and this was an important aspect of the activity in the small groups.

The experiment was useful especially for those students who wished to have more theory in their studies. As they put it, they wanted to have more theory, but if the expectation was that they should seek for relevant theories from course literature elsewhere, then they do not do it. The Practice and Theory model made application of theories easy enough, and preparing for small groups discussions pushed students to take the theories further and experiment with them seriously.

## The challenges of the teaching experiment

The teaching experiment also encountered challenges. In candidate-level studies, our teaching experiment was part of a social work practice course that was as such already heavily packed with different kinds of learning objectives, extensive practical parts in social work agencies, classroom teaching in the university, and written assignments. Both students and small group teachers felt that students were unable to focus on the exercise sufficiently, and therefore work on theories sometimes remained superficial:

The fall semester was quite rough for many of us, because we had this practice course and other courses and then in addition possibly our own paid jobs. On the one hand it was quite easy and efficient to have those short papers about theory today, kind of summaries which could be digested quickly. But you are quite right that it remained superficial, it could have been deeper [student in a focus group].

Especially newcomer students with no earlier experience of work in human services felt that in a new working environment in which they had so much to learn and digest, it

was challenging to focus on reflecting theories. In a situation like this, the theories did not get enough attention or simply caused extra stress:

It was demanding for me even to keep them [the theories] in my mind. Everything, there were so many new things, I just tried to remain on the ground in that situation, basically just to understand what was going on in the client meetings and client cases. [...] Additional experimenting with theoretical lenses and analysing situations through them and from an extra perspective was truly demanding [student in a focus group].

Small group teachers observed that many of the students would have liked to immerse themselves in practice and forget about theories for a while, and therefore experimenting with theoretical lenses was not motivating for them and they felt it was superficial and superimposed. As a small group teacher wisely put it, this notion underlines how important it is to facilitate and support students to combine theory and practice.

During the teaching experiment we also learned that reflection can be more difficult for students with little or no earlier practical experience from social work. Applying the theories in practical work was not easy for all of them, and some tended to limit their discussions in small groups to direct observations based on the theories instead of sharing the new insights or ideas that they had got when experimenting with the theories. Earlier experience of the small group members affected the quality and content of the discussions. Those students with little or no earlier experience might not have had much to bring to the joint discussion on the theories in the small group, or the discussions remained short. Nevertheless, during the course, students got more experience and were encouraged to discuss and reflect on the theories.

Another challenge was related to social work agencies, the work situations and the organizational cultures in them. Some students' experience was that work on theories was hindered by the agency's lack of culture of reflecting on and applying theories and research. This was often related to the high workloads of social workers, but also to a lack of understanding and ignorance towards theories. Not all the practice teachers were sufficiently acquainted with the teaching experiment, and, as a result, the students were left alone to reflect on theories:

Well, ... I had the experience of being left alone with them [the theories]. Or, I consider that my practice teacher and the work community, the other social workers, had not familiarized themselves with the theories because of a lack of time. I don't know what the practice teachers were like [how prepared], or whether someone discussed with them that students use this kind of... [learning method]. But sometimes I felt that they didn't really know what I was talking about. But I told them about each of the three theories. [...] So I did it, yes, but it was kind of just about my personal learning. Again, if you compare this with what I heard from other small group members, that they had discussed the theories much more actively with the practice teacher [...] That was lacking. But it was interesting to reflect on the theories anyway [student in a focus group].

As a student describes above, in less theory-friendly workplaces it required a lot from the students themselves to proceed with the Practice and Theory experiment. Some of the students even encountered a claim that theories are not used in practical social work. Often experienced practitioners do not recognize the theoretical background of their practice, and they may be stuck in certain operating models. In the conditions of high workloads and exhaustion, practitioners may concentrate on survival of one workday at a time, and discussion on theories may provoke distrust and questioning. Moreover, some of the practitioners may be afraid of losing their face in front of the student, if their incompetence in using theories uncovers.

These notions bring to the forefront a certain precondition for successful usage of the Practice and Theory method in social work practice teaching: there must be at least interest and openness towards the theories in the workplace. If the connection to theory remains weak in the field, students' learning of combining theory and practice during their practice internships remains superficial. In practice teaching, learning by model plays a great role, and if no one speaks about theories in practice, students learn that theories are not relevant.

Third of the main challenges of the teaching experiment relates to the academic community. In the beginning, we did not get full support by our colleagues. University small group teachers first resisted the teaching experiment. They were hesitant, whether theory can be used in this way, and whether the pieces used in the experiment can be called theories at all, and that it undermines the whole idea of a research university to squeeze theories to one piece of paper. They suggested that we should not call the experimented perspectives theories, but rather «scholarly perspectives» or something else.

One of the small group teachers also stated that they do not have profound enough understanding of all the chosen theoretical perspectives to be able to teach them. Their opinion was that one should have read everything written by Goffman to be able to discuss facework in a proper way. Another small group teacher challenged this opinion in the focus group and stated that summaries are enough for this type of working and added that students and teachers can seek for further information together, if needed. In dialogical learning, a teacher is not supposed to stay always in the position of a knower, but they can be also not-knowers and learners. Nevertheless, to overcome the critique of superficiality, in the second year of the teaching experiment we gave a lecture on each of the theories, and added suggested further readings on the online teaching platform.

## **The consequences on students' emerging professional identity**

Several consequences on students' emerging professional identity can be found in the data. The teaching experiment supported students' emerging professional identity.

In the focus groups, students talked about the importance of this kind of theoretical considerations also in the future, when they will work as social work practitioners.

I got an idea that hopefully later in the working life I'll be motivated to return to theories and research every now and then, and to reflect the practice through them. I could see that it gave a lot to have them side by side [student in a focus group].

The above-quoted student considered that the goal and the best offering of the Practice and Theory experimenting for them personally was that they got an experience of the fruitfulness of a way of working that pays attention to reflecting practice in the light of theories. At the same time, students were a bit hesitant, how realistic it will be to find time for theories in the hectic practice. They contrasted the «old-school» social workers, who have not understood that social work practice is changing, and new research-minded practitioners, who understand the role of education and science, and value it. Students were irritated about opinions that undermine education and the role of theories. They said that Practice and Theory experimenting had supported them in their reflections about what kind of social workers they want to become.

Theories also diversified students' thinking and developed their ability to use different perspectives in their thinking and to look situations encountered in practice from multiple angles. This was enabled by the relevancy the theories for practical work, as well as good discussions with the practice teacher and in the university small group. Discussions around the theories helped students to reflect client cases from new perspectives. As one of the students put it in a focus group, the most important learning was to challenge oneself to multi-faceted reflections with the help of theories, and to see how things look different with new theoretical lenses. This had consequences also on students' argumentation skills, which strengthened. Closely to that, one of the small group teachers evaluated that the most important offering of the Practice and Theory method was that the students adopt an idea of looking at social work practice through theoretical lenses and of social work practice having a theoretical foundation.

Finally, the teaching experiment evoked in students a desire to develop themselves as research-minded practitioners. They found familiarizing and experimenting with theories as well as utilizing them afterwards inspiring. Awareness of theories increased a will to study more and to return to theories as a mature practitioner. At its best, the teaching experiment had generated an insight that university teaches to think, and acquiring scientific knowledge to be applied in practical work continues the whole career.

## Conclusions

In this article, we have analyzed the outcomes of a teaching experiment, which was realized during a candidate-level social work practice-training course in academic years

2017-2018 and 2018-2019. The aim of the teaching experiment was to demonstrate to social work students, how research and theories are intertwined in social work practice, and to produce research-minded social workers with an ability to translate scientific knowledge into practice. In this article, we have analyzed the possibilities and challenges of the teaching experiment and the consequences of the theory experiments on students' emerging professional identity.

To conclude, the analysis shows that the teaching experiment enabled modeling the students the role of theories in practice and how theories can enhance reflection and shared knowledge creation. At the same time, the analysis strengthens the understanding that teaching students how to integrate theories in practice requires sufficient resources of time and supervision in collaboration between university and practice. Third, it can be concluded that the teaching experiment strengthened the students emerging, reflective and research-minded professionalism. Our results were similar to the study on Theory Circle Model (Collingwood, Emod, & Woodward, 2008): both models supported students' ability to consider theoretical explanations. In our teaching experiment model, the reflection was not, however, only focused on service users' situations but into social work and work place practices in general.

The working method was not easy especially for those students with no prior experience of social work practice. It was hard to concentrate on theoretical reflections, while everything in the practical setting was new. Some of the students wondered whether the Practice and Theory method would work better as a part of master's studies. In our university, though, the curriculum does not allow this, because master's-level practice courses focus on simulations of multi-professional cooperation and practice research rather than professional practices. Moreover, the close connection to practice, which is a crucial precondition for the use of this method, is not available. Without the structural constraints of the curriculum, though, it would be worthwhile to consider applying this method in the master's studies, when students already have some earlier experience of practical social work and thus have more resources to concentrate on theoretical considerations.

Importantly, combining theory and practice in social work practice training does not happen automatically, and students and supervisors need tools for it. We learnt that the required preconditions for experimenting with theories include at least time, intellectual space, and support from the practice teacher and work community in which the student is doing his/her practice internship. As with the implementation of the Theory Circle model (Collingwood, Emod, & Woodward, 2008), we could have provided more thorough training for the practice teachers. This could have deepened the supervision discussion and also encouraged the students to reflect on theories with service users. Now the discussions mainly took place with a small group teacher who had a strong theoretical understanding and an ability to discuss the role of theories with students. However, universities play a key role in creating the tools and encouraging the practitioners to engage in theoretical considerations with students. We hope that this model that we have developed could

serve as a starting point and inspiration for developing these tools in other institutions educating social workers.

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