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# **Clients and Students: Reflections on the Parallels Found Between Direct Social Work Practice and Social Work Education**

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## **Abstract**

This article discusses the reflections of a social work educator turned doctoral student during her first semester of doing both concurrently. Interesting parallels found between the social worker/client and social work educator/student relationships are examined. Foundational social work concepts such as the right to self-determination, dual relationships, and resilience are each discussed from the perspective of a social worker balancing multiple roles and some conclusions drawn about the usefulness of basic social work skills in a variety of settings.

*Key words:* social work, educator, client, student, resilience, self-determination, dual relationships

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Early in my social work career, I worked in direct clinical social work practice, serving clients with substance use disorders and persistent mental illness. However, my career trajectory changed when I earned the opportunity to join the social work faculty at a public regional university in eastern Kentucky. I found academia to be both challenging and rewarding, so I decided to enter a doctoral program in hopes of furthering my teaching career. As part of the doctoral program, I completed a teaching practicum, which encouraged me to be self-reflective and to think more analytically about my teaching style, daily practices, and interactions with students. This self-reflection and analysis led to some insights and conclusions about the unexpected parallels I found between working with social work clients and teaching social work students.

There are several concepts that could be examined through this lens of parallelism. Social justice, self-determination, human dignity, dual relationships, integrity, and resilience are just a few. Based on the experiences I had during this teaching practicum and on the issues and challenges that have been most prominent for my students, I have chosen four concepts to highlight here in this article. Those concepts that will be discussed are self-determination, dual relationships, and resilience, as well as the concept of delayed results, as explained through the metaphor of planting a seed and watering. The purpose of this dialogue is to encourage social

work educators to recognize the practicality of using common social work skills in their everyday interactions with students, as well as the importance of valuing each student as a unique individual, just as they would a client. It is beneficial for educators to recognize that the unique skill set they developed and crafted during their days in direct social work practice does not have to be left at the door of academia. Instead, those skills can be leveraged to engage students and promote a supportive and effective learning environment.

### **Self-Determination**

Accepting and maximizing a client's right to self-determination is a core value of the social work profession, but one that we have all struggled with occasionally. In the National Association of Social Workers' *Code of Ethics*, it is stated that "Social workers respect and promote the right of clients to self-determination and assist clients in their efforts to identify and clarify their goals" (2006, p. 7). Self-determination is a belief that the client has the right to make their own decisions about their treatment and care, even if the social worker does not agree with their choices (Zastrow, 1996). Even further, self-determination is every person's right to "hold and express their own opinions and act on them, as long as doing so does not infringe on the rights of others" (Zastrow, 1996, p. 221). Self-determination theory posits that humans all have an underlying need for competence and autonomy, and that when people feel those two things are satisfied, they become more intrinsically motivated (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2008).

The goal of an effective social worker should be to empower the client to make decisions on their own behalf, and to provide links to the adequate and appropriate resources that will foster autonomy, build their competence, and discourage dependence on the social worker (The Social Work Task Force, 2009). There should always be an assumption that the client is the expert about his or her own life and that we serve as an adjunct who can come alongside him or her, providing encouragement and support, as well as resources and services, all while serving as a role model (De Jong & Berg, 2002). Tower (1994) iterates this in her discussion of how social workers should adopt consumer-centered orientations, stating, "Consumers need good role models if they are to become more autonomous" (p. 195). Clients who have not had many positive role models need to see hard work, ethics, resourcefulness, and determinism lived out in a real way and the social worker can serve in this role. Promoting client self-determination is a way of putting the client back in the driver's seat, when they have been disempowered and have become dependent upon others to make decisions affecting their lives. We must respect and uphold their right to self-determination, even when they make decisions that we do not endorse. Social workers must accept that, unless they are a danger to themselves or others, the client has the right to make poor choices, to disregard the resources or services we link them to, or to take no action at all.

Similarly, students also have a right to self-determination in their academic endeavors. As social work educators, it is our role to facilitate learning and to provide opportunities for students to critically examine ideas, consider new perspectives, and to gain the skills they need to become effective social workers. Utilizing experiential learning opportunities and a flipped classroom environment that involves students spending time outside of class being engaged in the material can increase their intrinsic motivation (Abeysekera & Dawson, 2015). Research indicates that students have higher levels of intrinsic motivation when they are taught in a manner that values their autonomy and involves real-world application to the concepts being learned (Ryan & Deci,

2016). Furthermore, educators must teach students social work ethics and the fundamentals of ethical decision making, while also serving as a role model and allowing the students to witness those ethical principles being lived out in daily practice. Our goal as educators should not be for the students to be dependent on us to “spoon-feed” information to them, but rather we should encourage and foster their own independence, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and self-reflection as they develop into social workers. “Students with a high sense of self-efficacy are committed to achieving difficult goals and often visualize successful scenarios that lead to positive behavior and outcomes” (Farchi, 2014, p. 134).

As when working with clients, educators must accept that our role is simply to provide students all the resources, knowledge, skills training, and experiential opportunities possible. However, it is ultimately the student’s responsibility to capitalize upon those resources and make the most of their educational endeavors. Their ultimate success or failure is a result of their choices and effort, not mine, and I simply serve as a facilitator in the process. As a graduate student, I have found this notion to be empowering – the idea that the outcome of my educational undertakings is my responsibility. Although I have incredibly talented and knowledgeable professors, a valuable advisory committee, and a supportive cohort of peers, ultimately the ideas and the work must come from me. Subsequently, the resulting successes are mine to relish and the failures are mine from which to learn.

### **Dual Relationships**

The complicated subject of dual relationships is another similarity found between client/social worker and student/educator relationships. The *Code of Ethics* of the National Association of Social Workers (2006) states, “Dual or multiple relationships occur when social workers relate to clients in more than one relationship, whether professional, social, or business. Dual or multiple relationships can occur simultaneously or consecutively” (p. 9). Social workers are advised to avoid dual relationships whenever possible, particularly when there is a risk of exploitation or harm to the client (National Association of Social Workers, 2006). The risk of exploitation or harm is always present in client/social worker relationships due to the power differential and the roles social workers often play in influencing important aspects of a client’s life. Social workers must learn to navigate that delicate balance where they connect to a client closely enough to build rapport/maintain the position of authority and objectiveness that is needed to be fair. This is an issue for professors all across every university, but is particularly challenging in the social work department, because the faculty tend to be natural helpers, and the students often assume that their social work professor can also be their therapist. Social Work educators must be able to provide assistance to the student in their time of crisis, and then refer them to the appropriate campus or off-campus counseling service to meet their ongoing needs (Congress, 1996).

Equitability in guiding classroom interactions and in grading is an example of the social justice we teach and to which we aspire. I have found this to be challenging because the personality traits and skills such as humility, approachability, and sincerity that have allowed me to be an effective recruiter, advisor, and teacher, are often mistaken by students as a sign of friendship or of being peers. It is my ongoing responsibility to keep that boundary between teacher and student clear, while also showing genuine concern and interest in their personal and academic development. A recent study looking at the dynamics of student-faculty relationships found that the more relaxed and personal a professor’s relationship became with students, the more likely

the students were to exhibit problematic behaviors in the classroom (Chory & Offstein, 2016). Keeping clear boundaries and avoiding dual relationships helps ensure that my classroom behavior and grading practices are fair and equitable for all students.

I have seen this concept emulated well by my doctoral program advisors and professors. While they are friendly and attentive to my academic needs, it is clear that we are not peers, we are not equals, and we are not friends. Although that may be difficult for some to accept, I have found it to be a valuable learning tool, as I watch them model appropriate boundaries and professional behavior, and then I can emulate that with my own students.

### **Resilience of Students and Clients**

Client resilience has long been a concept that social workers accept and applaud, but often do not fully understand. A review of the research surrounding resilience indicates that the definition does not yet have consensus in the literature. Commonly, resilience is conceptualized as the ability to face chronic adversity with adaptability and perseverance and the presence of minimal maladaptive symptoms (Van Breda, 2001; Dubowitz et al., 2016; Bonanno & Mancini, 2011). Resilience describes the tendency of a system to seek homeostasis after experiencing extreme stress, helping the system to respond, recover, and to often improve its functioning (Van Breda, 2015; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000).

As social workers, we often get to witness amazing stories of resilience in the face of tremendous adversity and are often in awe of the tenacity and strength of the human spirit. Employing a strengths-based perspective with clients, social workers value the clients' resilience and ability to overcome adversity, while focusing less on their problems and deficits (Saleeby, 1996). A strengths-based perspective posits that all people have inherent gifts and resources that can help them thrive, despite any known barriers or negative circumstances (Saleeby, 2013). With specific populations, such as those diagnosed with dementia, this perspective encourages workers to focus on what remains, as opposed to what is lost, in order to capitalize on the client's remaining time (McGovern, 2015). Resilience and a strengths-based perspective go hand-in-hand when working with clients, as both value the positive traits of a client and focus on what is going well for the client and how they have responded positively to barriers and hardship (Saleeby, 2013).

Fortunately, as educators, we also get to see the concept of resilience unfold in our classrooms and with our students. When I left direct social work practice to begin teaching, it never occurred to me that my students would be facing the challenges and barriers that they often encounter in pursuit of their undergraduate degree. Teaching at a regional university that recruits and educates individuals from a region riddled with poverty, unemployment, and disability has given me the opportunity to work with students from a variety of situations that exemplify the concept of resilience.

In his study about academic resilience, Martin (2013) states, "Academic resilience has been defined as a capacity to overcome acute and/or chronic adversity that is seen as a major threat to a student's educational development" (p. 488). Academic resilience is seen as competence exhibited by high risk students despite their history of problematic experiences (Luthar, 2006; Ungar, 2011; Yates, Egeland, & Sroufe, 2003). In my short teaching tenure, I have seen many

examples of academic resilience. Resilient students view change and adversity as a challenge and an opportunity to commit to the task and focus on their personal and professional goals (Kobasa, 1979; Rutter, 1985). My students have faced unplanned pregnancies, miscarriages, deaths of loved ones, births, weddings, unemployment, house fires, mental illness, financial strain, domestic violence, and divorce. However, they have shown incredible intrinsic motivation and resilience while continuing to work towards completing their degree.

Every time I attend a commencement ceremony and watch my students walk across the stage to receive their BSW, I recognize what a privilege it is to be an educator. As such, I get to witness them overcoming barriers that could have prevented their success, but which served to encourage their growth and resilience. Similar to my work with clients, I view my students from a strengths-based perspective, valuing the unique place from which each one came and nurturing the strengths and gifts they possess.

### **Planting a Seed and Watering**

One last parallel that I have discovered between working with clients and working with students is the awareness that the work we do today rarely produces immediate results. The work done with clients is often not fully appreciated nor recognized immediately, but the impacts can be far-reaching and instrumental in the trajectory of the client's life. "We use the gardening metaphor of 'planting a seed' to refer to interventions that may not blossom in the short term but can bear fruit months or years later" (Jarldorn et al., 2015, p. 921). As social workers, we must be willing to invest our time and energy into individuals, families, and organizations, understanding that we may never know the specific influence our work has had, while trusting in the process and believing that the effort is valuable and productive.

Similarly, our work as educators consists of a great deal of seed planting and watering, with an understanding that the fruits may not come for years and that we may never know the impact we have made on our students. Not only are the knowledge, skills, and curriculum-based lessons that we teach students important, but our behavior, ethics, sincerity, and the relationships we have built with them teach volumes beyond the tangible diploma they will receive.

### **Final Thoughts**

In my transition from social work practitioner to social work educator to social work student and back again, I have found there to be many similarities between my work with clients and my work with students. The natural traits and the learned skills that enabled me to be an effective change agent with clients in the field are now benefitting me and giving me the necessary tools to work effectively with social work students. I have realized that the warmth, empathy, and genuineness that we teach about so abstractly in introductory social work courses are actually the foundational pieces of my teaching and advising style.

In both cases, working with clients and with students, I consider it a tremendous honor and privilege to be able to walk alongside someone as they make decisions, change behaviors, and gain the tools and resources they need to embark on a new journey in their life. I would encourage all social work educators to recognize the effectiveness of using the basic social work skills they already possess when engaging their students. Additionally, I would emphasize the

importance of valuing each student as a unique individual, just as they would a client. The knowledge and skills we learned in our own social work education can now be leveraged to educate and empower the next generation of social workers.

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