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# Learning activities during practice placements: developing professional competence and social work identity of social work students

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## ABSTRACT

Social work is a demanding profession requiring a range of skills, competencies, and knowledge. Students are expected to learn about these practice related issues through immersion in real world experiences during their practice placement. A cross-sectional, retrospective survey was used to explore Finnish social work students' ( $N = 95$ ) experiences of learning activities employed by their supervisors during the practice placement, and the usefulness of these activities for developing professional competence and a sense of social work identity. Findings confirmed that students received a wide range of learning opportunities during their placement, but that there was considerable variation in the regularity of learning activities. The most useful learning activities included a collaborative working relationships and activities involving the student and their practice teacher, such as feedback, reflecting on work, feelings and values, observing others, and being assisted to learn new skills. In contrast, providing theoretical perspectives and linking theory to practice were regarded as least useful. Students with a lower overall learning activity score, were less likely to develop an understanding of social work identity during their placement. These results contribute to a growing evidence base, which can inform social work academics and practice teachers about learning activities that need to be offered to promote practice competence and professional identity of students, in preparation for professionally qualifying.


## KEYWORDS

Social work education; practice learning; placement; professional identity; competence

## Introduction

Social work is a demanding and stressful profession requiring a range of skills, competencies, and knowledge. One of the main tasks of social work education is to provide students with opportunities to develop the necessary skills for promoting people's wellbeing, alongside building research and science-based knowledge about social lives, social problems, social policies, communities and societies (Lähtinen et al. 2017). According to the International Federation of Social Workers, 'social work is a practice profession and an academic discipline that recognizes that interconnected historical, socio-economic, cultural, spatial, political and personal factors serve as opportunities and/or barriers to human wellbeing and development' (IFSW).

One of the core ways for students to learn about practice related issues is through immersion in real working life environments through a field or practice placement. As the 'signature pedagogy' of social work education (Wayne, Bogo, and Raskin 2010), practice placements expose students to real

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life professional social work situations, where they work alongside qualified social workers, and engage with service users, carers, families and groups. This provides students with opportunities to apply theoretical, legal and scientific evidence to their assessment, risk management, care planning and interventions with service users and families (Lähteinen et al. 2017). As such, placements are considered among the most important elements of social work education, where students can learn and develop confidence in applying new skills, integrate knowledge and examine their values under supervision of a qualified social worker in a health or human service agency (Cleak and Wilson 2019). The main objectives are to train future professionals who have the skills and knowledge to competently work in demanding professional practice and navigate complex micro, meso and macro systems.

While the objectives of practice placements in social work education are shared internationally, the priorities of social work practice and the way in which student placements are managed vary from one country to the next, depending on historical, cultural, political and socio-economic conditions (IFSW). Practice placements differ and require the involvement of a range of academic and practice partners, which can influence the quality and variety of learning opportunities available to social work students (Roulston, Cleak, and Vreugdenhil 2018).

Global and local differences impact on how placements are identified and allocated, how students are assessed and supervised, and the range of learning activities provided to support students' learning (Cleak, Roulston, and Vreugdenhil 2016; Fortune, McCarthy, and Abramson 2001). A number of studies have investigated what learning activities social work students value most and which contribute to their sense of competence and professional identity (Cleak, Roulston, and Vreugdenhil 2016; Roulston, Cleak, and Vreugdenhil 2018).

This paper explores Finnish social work students' level of satisfaction with the learning activities provided on placement and the usefulness of these for the development of their professional competence and sense of social work identity. The analysis contributes to the growing evidence base that can inform social work educators internationally about the types of learning activities that should be taken into account when developing a good quality placement that prepares qualifying students for practice.

## **Practice placement in social work education in a global context**

Historically, the structure and processes of a practice placement were based on an apprenticeship model, where a student entered a supportive relationship with the supervisor who facilitated and nurtured the learning (Bogo 2015; Cleak and Zuchowski 2019). Over the years, newer models of supervision have emerged, partly as a pedagogical response to a more mutual, rather than hierarchical learning experience (Bellinger, Bullen, and Ford 2014). Increasing student enrolments within higher education to address the shortage of social workers and fiscal pressures within health and social care organizations, have prompted a growth in the range of practice placement providers and challenged social work programmes around the world (Bogo 2015; Crisp and Hosken 2016; Croisdale-Appleby 2014; Roulston, Cleak, and Vreugdenhil 2018; Vassos, Harms, and Rose 2019; Wilson 2012). These changes impact on the delivery and assessment of practice placements such as the long-arm or external supervision model (Cleak, Roulston, and Vreugdenhil 2016; Roulston, Cleak, and Vreugdenhil 2018). This model offers a qualified practice teacher to provide long-arm supervision and assessment of student learning alongside either a qualified social worker or an unqualified social worker, who acts as an 'on-site supervisor' to oversee the day-to-day work. Some students have expressed dissatisfaction about having an unqualified onsite supervisor, due to their poor understanding of the social work role (Roulston, Cleak, and Vreugdenhil 2018). Furthermore, practice placement sites with no qualified social workers offer limited modelling opportunities and observation of social work practitioners, and fewer opportunities to conduct all elements of the social work process with different service users (Bogo 2015; Cleak and Zuchowski 2019; Roulston, Cleak, and Vreugdenhil 2018).

Despite the perceived and actual variation in student experiences (Bogo 2015; Cleak, Roulston, and Vreugdenhil 2016; Roulston, Cleak, and Vreugdenhil 2018) and learning outcomes (Roulston et al. 2021), most research emphasizes the central importance of the supervisory relationship. Student satisfaction measures are captured in a range of empirical studies that suggest a strong correlation between the student-supervisor relationship and the student's overall satisfaction with placement (Bogo 2015; Cleak and Zuchowski 2019; Flanagan and Wilson 2018; Roulston, Cleak, and Vreugdenhil 2018). Bogo (2015) reported five elements that contributed to a higher quality practice placement, one of which is collaborative relationships with practice teachers and opportunities for students to observe and debrief. Supportive supervision and feedback from practice teachers had the most positive impact on learning in an Irish study conducted by Flanagan and Wilson (2018). Roulston and colleagues (Roulston, Cleak, and Vreugdenhil 2018) reported that students most valued regular supervision, constructive feedback, observing social workers, and thinking critically about the social work role. In Brodie and Williams (2013) analyses of the activities used within student supervision, the most significant finding was the frequency of 'exploring' as a learning activity and its association with students being encouraged and enabled to analyse their practice.

Other studies examined what practice opportunities contributed to the development of a social work student's competence and capabilities to act as future social workers (Ching, Wong, and Leung 2007; Flanagan and Wilson 2018; Smith, Cleak, and Vreugdenhil 2015; Wiles 2013; Wilson, Walsh, and Kirby 2008; Wilson and Flanagan 2019). On developing a sense of competence and professional identity, Caffrey and others (Caffrey et al. 2021), who based their study on students' views on the role and impact of the practice teacher, highlight the space afforded to students to reflect on practice learning in a safe environment. However, research also indicates that students' experiences of learning during practice placements vary and are not always positive. For instance, Smith, Cleak, and Vreugdenhil (2015) found that half of the social work students they surveyed ( $n = 263$ ) did not regularly have the opportunity to observe social work practice, have their practice observed, or to link their practice to social work theory or the Code of Ethics. A UK based study involving 396 students (Roulston, Cleak, and Vreugdenhil 2018) confirmed that students did not highly value knowledge for practice activities and professional codes, and students felt disadvantaged working in agencies with no clear social work role. Students from minority groups (de Bie et al. 2021) described placement experiences that actively interfered with their learning, rather than contributing to it.

Earlier studies (Cleak and Smith 2012; Cleak, Roulston, and Vreugdenhil 2016; Roulston, Cleak, and Vreugdenhil 2018) showed that the on-site (singleton) practice teacher supervision model and the long-arm practice teacher with a qualified on-site social worker as supervisor were most successful in terms of student satisfaction and positive response to learning activities during placement.

This paper investigates Finnish social work students' experience of their field placement and examines the students' perception on the usefulness of the learning activities to their professional competence and developing sense of social work identity. The analysis can help inform social work academics and practice educators internationally about the activities that facilitate the planning and execution of the supervisory role as well as the development of suitable teaching opportunities within settings that maximize student learning.

## **Social work education and practice placements in Finland**

The requirements for practicing professional social work in Finland comply with the competencies internationally defined and agreed upon (IASSW2021; IFSW). In Finland, social workers exercise public authority, and it is the only licenced profession in the social welfare system (Act on Social Welfare Professionals 817/2015). Social work is a strictly regulated profession which undertakes multiple professional tasks, such as leadership of social work services, working with various client groups, and evaluation and development of social work (Lähteinen et al. 2017). Social work education is provided at universities, and its practice is based on legislation.

In contrast to many other countries, qualification requires a Master's Degree in Social Work. This is achieved in a linear combination of a Bachelor in social work (BSW, 180 ECTS) followed by a Master's in social work (MSW, 120 ECTS). Once a student is admitted to the Bachelor's Degree Programme, they are granted the right to study in the Master's programme without a separate application. Hence, all MSW students have completed their Bachelor's degree in social work, or undertaken a required amount of university social work courses (85 ECTS) before their enrolment in the Master's programme.

Practice learning as part of social work studies consists of three cumulative modules called Practice Learning I (basic studies), II (intermediate studies) and III (advanced studies). While this basic format is nationally shared by the six universities providing social work education in Finland, there are slight differences between universities on how the modules are organized. In the Tampere University, where this research was conducted, the Practice Learning I is carried out as a voluntary work module in a (typically third sector) organization. The statutory field placements comprise of Practice Learning II and III, together forming 30 ECTS of the 300 ECTS of the Bachelor and Master's programme in social work (Government Decree on University Degrees 794/2004). This paper is based on the experiences of the students who have completed Practice Learning II or III placements.

The duration of Practice Learning II (BSW intermediate studies) is nine weeks, and it is conducted in social work agencies with service users. Practice Learning III (MSW advanced studies) involves more options as the placements are identified and organized by students. Each student's practice orientation is thus revealed through their placement choice, which for a minority of students may be outside direct service user work (i.e. research organizations, ministries or state agencies in research and development). This placement offers students more opportunities to act as independent practitioners, compared to their earlier, module II placement. In Finland, the on-site practice teacher (or singleton) arrangement is the only model used in social work practice placements and are professionally qualified (licenced) social work practitioners, providing each social work student with supervision, and assessing the student's overall progress during placement. Each student has one to three supervisors and, in addition to informal supervision, receives a minimum of two hours of formal supervision each week during their placement. The University occasionally organizes voluntary training for practice teachers to enhance their supervision skills and additional support is provided by the university staff to aid with the supervision task.

## Method

The study used a cross-sectional, retrospective survey tool to explore social work students' experiences of the social work learning activities used by their supervisors during the practice placement. The survey was undertaken in 2019–2020 using an electronic questionnaire comprising a range of closed and open-ended questions.

## Research questions

The aims of this research were to study the Finnish social work students experience of their field placements through the following two aspects:

- a) the regularity of the learning activities during the placement
- b) the perceived usefulness by students of these learning activities in terms of developing practice competence and a sense of social work identity

## **Survey questionnaire**

The Finnish questionnaire was based on a slightly modified version of the questionnaire originally developed in Australia (see Cleak and Smith 2012; Smith, Cleak, and Vreugdenhil 2015) and modified for a UK based study (Cleak, Roulston, and Vreugdenhil 2016; Roulston, Cleak, and Vreugdenhil 2018). Minor adjustments were made to the questionnaire to account for differences in cultural context and terminology. The following data was collected: the demographic characteristics of the students; information about the practice placement; supervision structure; and students' experience of the sixteen key learning activities used by their social work supervisors.

The sixteen learning activities included in the survey questionnaire were aligned to the key roles for social work practice and a review of available literature regarding social work practice placements, including the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). Students were first asked to record the extent to which they engaged in each learning activity with their social work supervisor using a 4-point Likert-scale of 'not at all', 'rarely', 'sometimes' or 'regularly', with a higher score reflecting a more frequent rating. The second set of questions asked students to rate the usefulness of the 16 learning activities for developing their practice competence and social work identity using a 4-point Likert scale of 'very useful', 'useful', 'not very useful', or 'not at all useful at all' (with an option of 'not applicable') (cf. Roulston, Cleak, and Vreugdenhil 2018).

## **Sampling, recruitment and administration**

All second year BSW students and final year MSW students from Tampere University, Finland, who had completed their module II or III practice placement, were given a brief overview of the research project and were invited to participate in the study. Students were informed that participation was voluntary and anonymous. On completion of placement, students were sent a link to the online questionnaire. The research team adhered to the research ethical guidelines provided by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (see TENK 2021).

## **Data analysis**

The data were analysed with the IBM SPSS software, version 27. The level of missing data or survey items range from 2.0% for the demographic items through to 12.6% for one of the learning activities. For most items the level of missing data was less than 5% of responses. Frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations were calculated for each of the 16 learning activities. The regularity of learning activities, as well as how useful students found them in terms of learning outcomes (competence and social work identity) were ranked using their mean scores.

An 'overall regularity of learning activities' score was computed as the sum of the 16 individual learning activity scores with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.893. Few missing variables were replaced with group (BSW/MSW) means in each variable (Hertel 1976) resulting in a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.882, still indicating a high level of internal consistency.

Chi-square analysis ( $X^2$ ) were conducted to test for associations between the 'overall regularity of learning activities' score and the two learning outcomes ('feelings of practice competence' and 'sense of social work identity'). To undertake these analyses, the responses for the outcome variables 'feelings of practice competence' and 'sense of social work identity' were dichotomized into 'yes' (strongly agree, agree) and 'no' (strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree or disagree). In addition, the 'overall regularity of learning activities' scores were grouped into 'low regularity', 'medium regularity' and 'high regularity' using tertile cut-offs to create three equally-sized groups for comparison, respectively 33.7%, 31.6% and 34.7%. These categories were also combined to compare low regularity versus medium and high regularity situations. Statistical significance was set at 95% probability.

## Findings

### Participant demographics

A strong response rate (91.1%) was obtained from the Bachelor's Social Work (BSW) students, with 51 of 56 students completing the questionnaire. The response rate from Master's social work (MSW) students was lower (38.3%), with only 44 out of 115 students participating. This lower response rate could be attributed to the structure of the MSW placement arrangements, with students completing this part of their degree at different times of the year and were therefore less accessible as a group to invite to participate. The final overall response rate was 55.6% based on 95 respondents.

The majority of participants were female (90% BSW; 94.9% MSW), which reflected the high female social work student population in Finland. The mean age of the participants was 32.5 years ( $SD = 9.9$ ). Almost half of the students (47.5%) were aged under 30; one fifth were aged 30–39 (21.7%); one fifth were 40–49 years old (20.7%) and seven students (7.4%) were aged 50 or over. Ninety-eight percent of participants were native-born Finnish and described their cultural background as Finnish (from the option of choosing a minority background of Finland-Swedish, the Sami or the Finnish Roma).

As outlined in Table 1 below, 54% of participants were enrolled in the BSW and 46% of participants were MSW students. Although some significant differences exist in the responses of these two groups, the analysis combined the two groups to get an overall picture about their placement experiences, in terms of learning tasks and their perceived usefulness. It is anticipated that the differences between the groups will be reported elsewhere.

**Table 1.** Placement setting ( $N = 95$ ).

	Placement level in curriculum					
	Bachelor students (1 <sup>st</sup> field placement)		Master students (final field placement)		Total	
	$n = 51$	53.7%	$n = 44$	46.3%	$n = 95$	100.0%
Placement type						
Full-time	51	100.0	41	93.2	92	96.8
Part-time	0	0.0	3	6.8	3	3.2
Placement with						
Adult services	25	49.0	16	36.4	41	43.2
Children's services	24	47.1	18	40.9	42	44.2
Other	2	3.9	10	22.7	12	12.6
Primary line of work						
Social work with adults	8	15.7	11	25.0	19	20.0
Probation and after-care	0	0.0	1	2.3	1	1.1
Child protection, family services	23	45.1	18	40.9	41	43.2
Social work with immigrants	2	3.9	2	4.5	4	4.2
Mental health work	3	5.9	2	4.5	5	5.3
Substance abuse treatment/rehabilitation	2	3.9	1	2.3	3	3.2
Health social work	9	17.6	2	4.5	11	11.6
Employment services	1	2.0	0	0.0	1	1.1
Social work with disabled	1	2.0	2	4.5	3	3.2
Social work with the elderly	1	2.0	1	2.3	2	2.1
Other	1	2.0	4	9.1	5	5.3
Placement employer						
Municipality/joint municipal board	37	72.5	36	81.8	73	76.8
Supported housing unit	1	2.0	0	0.0	1	1.1
Hospital	11	21.6	1	2.3	12	12.6
Third sector organization	2	3.9	3	6.8	5	5.3
Research institute	0	0.0	1	2.3	1	1.1
State/ministry	0	0.0	2	4.5	2	2.1
Other	0	0.0	1	2.3	1	1.1

As full-time placements are favoured by the Finnish social work programmes, most students completed their placements full-time (97%), with only three MSW students completing it part-time. Forty-four percent of students completed their placement across children's services and 43% in adult's services, with the remainder (12.6%) completing their placement in 'other' which consists of family counselling, state administration, or community work with families. A more nuanced picture of the placement type is provided by the 'primary line of work', showing that over three-thirds of students were placed in municipal social work. This is reflective of the Finnish social welfare system where municipalities are the primary providers and responsible authoritative units of social work services (see social services). Hospitals were the second common agency for the students' field placements, and few students had completed their placement in third sector organizations. Field placement in research institutions or in ministry or other government agencies, are only available for MSW students, whereas direct practice with clients is obligatory for BSW students.

### Regularity of learning activities

Table 2 reports on the regularity of the 16 learning activities using a Likert scale which are presented in descending order in terms of their regularity.

The main learning activities that participants reported experiencing 'regularly' included being assisted to learn about the role and function of the team and organization in which they worked (83.0%); being provided with time to discuss and reflect on their practice skills (78.9%); having opportunities to observe social workers in practice (77.9%) and be observed (71.6%); and having opportunities to discuss their feelings and values about practice (71.6%).

In terms of the learning activities 'rarely' experienced, Table 2 shows that less than one third of respondents said they were 'rarely' provided with time to link theoretical knowledge to practice (29.5%), one fifth 'rarely' linked learning tasks with placement requirements (21.1%) and were 'rarely' provided with reading material and linking theory to practice (20.0%), and 14.0% 'rarely' encouraged to link practice to the national Code of Ethics.

Only six students reported 'regularly' receiving all 16 learning activities. However, considering that the sample median was 3.5 (between sometimes-regularly; *SD* .44), it can be stated that the students generally received regular assistance and opportunities for learning during their field placement.

**Table 2.** Regularity of experiencing learning activities on placement (*N* = 95).

Learning activity	Regularity of learning activity				
	Regularly	Sometimes	Rarely	Not at all	Total
Learn about role or function of team or organization	78 (83.0%)	13 (13.8%)	1 (1.1%)	0 (0.0%)	94 (98.9%)
Time to discuss and reflect on practice skills	75 (78.9%)	16 (16.8%)	3 (3.2%)	0 (0.0%)	94 (98.9%)
Observed practice of social workers in agency	74 (77.9%)	6 (6.3%)	8 (8.4%)	0 (0.0%)	88 (92.6%)
Practice of student was observed	68 (71.6%)	20 (21.1%)	6 (6.3%)	0 (0.0%)	94 (98.9%)
Discussed feelings and values about practice	68 (71.6%)	18 (18.9%)	6 (6.3%)	2 (2.1%)	94 (98.9%)
Provided with formal social work supervision	65 (68.4%)	20 (21.1%)	8 (8.4%)	1 (1.1%)	94 (98.9%)
Prepared and assisted to learn new skills	64 (67.4%)	20 (21.1%)	8 (8.4%)	0 (0.0%)	92 (96.8%)
Learn about resources, systems, and networks	62 (65.3%)	25 (26.3%)	4 (4.2%)	0 (0.0%)	91 (95.8%)
Reflected critically about role of social work	55 (57.9%)	29 (30.5%)	10 (10.5%)	0 (0.0%)	94 (98.9%)
Learn about legislation, policies, and procedures	52 (54.7%)	28 (29.5%)	11 (11.6%)	2 (2.1%)	93 (97.9%)
Learn about service user population	49 (51.6%)	29 (30.5%)	9 (9.5%)	2 (2.1%)	89 (93.7%)
Given constructive feedback about progress	48 (50.5%)	37 (38.9%)	8 (8.4%)	2 (2.1%)	95 (100.0%)
Linked practice to national Code of Ethics	39 (41.1%)	27 (28.4%)	14 (14.7%)	9 (9.5%)	89 (93.7%)
Provided time to link practice to theory	35 (36.8%)	26 (27.4%)	28 (29.5%)	3 (3.2%)	92 (96.8%)
Link tasks with the placement requirements	35 (36.8%)	27 (28.4%)	20 (21.1%)	11 (11.6%)	93 (97.9%)
Provided with reading material and theory	29 (30.5%)	42 (44.2%)	19 (20.0%)	3 (3.2%)	93 (97.9%)



**Table 3.** Usefulness of learning activities for developing practice competence and a sense of social work identity ( $N = 95$ ).

Learning activity	Usefulness for developing practice competence				Usefulness for developing a sense of social work identity			
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i> †	<i>SD</i>	% rating as very useful ‡	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i> †	<i>SD</i>	% rating as very useful ‡
Learn about role or function of team or organization	93	3.62	.51	63.4	92	3.63	.51	64.1
Learn about service user population	92	3.37	.66	45.7	91	3.31	.73	44.0
Learn about resources, systems, and networks	93	3.56	.54	58.1	92	3.40	.65	47.8
Learn about legislation, policies, and procedures	92	3.54	.54	56.5	91	3.52	.60	57.1
Observed practice of social workers in agency	90	3.64	.55	67.8	88	3.73	.47	73.9
Practice of student was observed	88	3.35	.71	48.9	87	3.48	.65	55.2
Prepared and assisted to learn new skills	88	3.68	.52	70.5	86	3.72	.50	74.4
Provided with reading material and theory	88	3.03	.82	33.0	86	3.03	.83	33.7
Discuss and reflect on practice skills	92	3.74	.44	73.9	90	3.70	.57	74.4
Provided time to link practice to theory	82	3.26	.68	39.0	83	3.19	.74	38.6
Given constructive feedback about progress	91	3.73	.52	75.8	89	3.73	.54	76.4
Discussed feelings and values about practice	91	3.63	.57	67.0	89	3.65	.55	68.5
Reflected critically about role of social work	91	3.64	.53	65.9	88	3.68	.52	70.5
Provided with formal social work supervision	90	3.41	.70	52.2	89	3.40	.70	51.7
Link tasks with the placement requirements	91	3.02	.70	22.0	87	3.01	.69	21.8
Linked practice to national Code of Ethics	89	3.33	.70	43.8	88	3.51	.61	56.8

† Higher score reflects a better rating (scale 1–4)

‡ Organized by question-order; % ratings as very useful highlighted when over 60%

### Usefulness of learning activities

Table 3 provides an analysis on what learning activities students considered most useful in terms of developing practice competence and developing a sense of social work identity.

As illustrated in Table 3, the learning activities ranked ‘most useful’ by the students were similar across for developing practice competence and developing a sense of social work identity. These included receiving constructive feedback about progress, discussing and reflecting on skills, being assisted to learn new skills, observing social workers, critically reflecting on the social work role, and having time to discuss feelings and values about practice. The learning activities ranked ‘least useful’ by the students included linking tasks to the practice requirements, being provided with reading materials, and linking theory to practice.

### Connection with overall regularity of learning activities and development of practice competence and sense of social work identity

Approximately 75% of the participants reported feeling competent with their practice skills after completing their practice placement, and 80% of them felt that they had developed a sense of social work identity (Table 4, Step 1). Comparing low, medium and high regularity of learning activities did not show a statistically significant effect on the students’ perceived practice competence or developing a sense of social work identity, but the emerging results were worth further examination (see Table 4, Step 2).

Firstly, as illustrated in Table 4, when the overall regularity score was split in three equal-sized groups (low, medium and high regularity), the cut-off values were rather high: even in the lowest third the upper cut-off point was 3.31 (on a scale 1–4) and second 3.69 respectively. This indicates that Finnish social work students are firmly situated in the higher end of the regularity of learning activities in their field placements (see Table 2), meaning that even the low regularity group receives regular general guidance. The analysis also demonstrates that after their practice placement, a high majority of students feel competent. In addition, during their placement, they manage to form a sense of social work identity and understand the role of social work in society.

**Table 4.** Regularity of learning activities and feelings of practice competence and a sense of social work identity ( $n = 94$ ).

STEP 1 (split into 3)	Feelings of practice competence			Sense of social work identity		
Overall regularity score	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total
Low regularity	22 (68.8%)	10 (31.3%)	32 (100%)	23 (71.9%)	9 (28.1%)	32 (100%)
Medium regularity	22 (75.9%)	7 (24.1%)	29 (100%)	24 (31.6%)	5 (17.2%)	29 (100%)
High regularity	27 (81.8%)	6 (18.2%)	33 (100%)	29 (38.2%)	4 (12.1%)	33 (100%)
Total	71 (75.5%)	23 (24.5%)	94 (100%)	76 (80.9%)	18 (19.1%)	94 (100%)
	$\chi^2 = 1.504; df = 2; p = .471$			$\chi^2 = 2.786; df = 2; p = .248$		
STEP 2 (split into 2)	Feelings of practice competence			Sense of social work identity		
Overall regularity score	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total
Low regularity	34 (70.8%)	14 (29.2%)	48 (100%)	35 (72.9%)	13 (27.1%)	48 (100%)
High regularity	37 (80.4%)	9 (19.6%)	46 (100%)	41 (89.1%)	5 (10.9%)	46 (100%)
Total	71 (75.5%)	23 (24.5%)	94 (100%)	76 (80.9%)	18 (19.1%)	94 (100%)
	$\chi^2 = 1.172; df = 1; p = .279$			$\chi^2 = 3.988; df = 1; p = .046$		

Secondly, the analysis was continued further by dividing the data in half<sup>1</sup> when the cut-off point was 3.50 (on a scale 1–4) with 51.6% of students being at the lower end (Table 4). This brought out statistically significant results regarding the sense of social work identity. These results show that the students with lower overall learning activity scores (i.e. who feel that they are not participating in learning activities as regularly as the other students), are less likely to develop an understanding of social work identity during their placement.

## Discussion

There are many studies which capture student satisfaction with their placement which generally reinforce the primacy of the supervisory relationship to mediate a range of learning activities. However, there is more limited research around how students develop their sense of social work identity during professional training, and what learning tasks are considered more useful in terms of developing competence as an emerging professional. This research, which builds on Australian (Cleak and Smith 2012) and UK-based studies (Cleak, Roulston, and Vreugdenhil 2016; Roulston, Cleak, and Vreugdenhil 2018), explores the placement experiences of Finnish BSW and MSW students and provides useful insights into what contributed to their competence and sense of social work identity. Although the 16 learning activities originate from the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) and the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC 2021) practice learning requirements for social work students, they underpin global practice standards for social work education (IFSW; Global Practice Standards for Social Work Education and Training 2020).

Despite being recruited from one of the six Finnish universities hosting social work degree programmes, the respondents are representative of the overall demographics of Finnish social work students (Lähteinen et al. 2017). Most respondents completed their practice placement in child protection services or adult services, and were full-time, which mirrors settings and students in similar studies (Cleak and Smith 2012; Cleak, Roulston, and Vreugdenhil 2016; Roulston, Cleak, and Vreugdenhil 2018). Two-thirds of our respondents completed placement in municipally governed social work offices (i.e. social services), which is reflective of the way that social work practice is organized in Finland and where most social work graduates are employed.

Overall, students in this study received most of the sixteen learning activities during placement, but with considerable variation in regularity. Over 70% of students regularly received five important social work learning tasks that included learning about the role and function of the team and organization, discussing and reflecting on practice skills, having opportunities to observe social workers in practice and being observed and discussing their feelings and values. This finding is similar to the UK based study (Cleak, Roulston, and Vreugdenhil 2016), except that their most

regular activity was receiving supervision and observing their practice teacher which was tenth out of the sixteen activities in our study. This was a concerning finding in the original studies in view of the recognition of role modelling and observing practice as an essential and useful learning strategy (Bogo 2015; Brodie and Williams 2013; Wilson and Flanagan 2019), which was less of a concern in Finland. It is also reassuring that the hallmarks of a quality social work placement are represented in the learning activities that students regularly received.

Perhaps one important learning activity that was less regularly received in this study than in the UK based study was that only half of the students were offered constructive feedback on their progress and was twelfth out of the 16 activities (Cleak, Roulston, and Vreugdenhil 2016). This may be because almost half of the students in this study were MSW students, who work rather independently during their practice placement and may not be receiving feedback on their work on regular bases. In addition, giving and receiving feedback can be difficult for both supervisors and students because it requires resilience to the feelings that can arise, but students are often concerned about their performance and welcome the opportunity to discuss how they are progressing (Cleak and Wilson 2019). A recent study of the tools that facilitated learning on placement reported that students identified valuable aspects of their supervisors' feedback, such as advice on ways of working or how to take the next step and they appreciated it when it was encouraging and constructive (Wilson and Flanagan 2019).

The learning activities that students received 'rarely' included linking social work tasks to practice requirements, professional codes, being provided with reading materials, or linking practice to theory. These findings mirror those reported in the Australian study (Cleak and Smith 2012) and the UK-based study (Cleak, Roulston, and Vreugdenhil 2016; Roulston, Cleak, and Vreugdenhil 2018). Although some practice teachers or supervisors may expect academics to provide students with theoretical and contextual knowledge, it is important that students are continuously taught how to integrate knowledge and practice, regardless of the learning environment. Why supervisors fail to provide these opportunities could be related to their own access to ongoing professional development activities provided within their organizations or from their professional association or social work programmes.

Less than half of students in this study regularly linked practice with the National Code of Ethics, which is consistent with earlier studies in Australia (Cleak and Smith 2012) and in Northern Ireland (Cleak, Roulston, and Vreugdenhil 2016; Roulston, Cleak, and Vreugdenhil 2018). This reflects the current working circumstances in many countries, where the adherence to the ethical principles or conscious reflection on them can be superseded by organizational priorities, and the precedence of managerial and procedural requirements over professional ones (Cleak, Roulston, and Vreugdenhil 2016). In Finland, as in most other social work programmes taught around the world, ethical issues including standards of conduct and practice standards that must be adhered to are embedded in the curriculum.

The collaboration between practising social workers and academic staff used to promote learning on placement in Finland and other countries could be extended to co-deliver aspects of the BSW and MSW curricula. However, given the increasing pressure experienced by health and social care professionals and exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19 (McFadden et al. 2021), finding meaningful ways to involve social care professionals in planning, delivering and evaluating the programmes' curricula could be challenging. In Finland, social work is a strictly regulated profession, and all practising social workers are trained at Master's degree level. Still, practice teachers in Finland are not required to complete specialist training prior to supervising or assessing student social workers. This is different than, for instance, in Northern Ireland, where all social workers have been trained at either Bachelor or Master's degree level, and all practice teachers must complete a specialist award course. In Australia, the professional association requires all accredited social work programmes to conduct annual training for supervisors (AASW 2021). This could be an important factor to consider worldwide, especially to promote the scientific and evidence base of teaching. It has been long recognized

that being a competent practitioner does not mean that they can be competent practice teachers and this role requires training and exposure to specialized knowledge and skills in educational techniques and teaching models (Cleak and Wilson 2019).

Although it was confirmed that students were regularly provided with various learning activities, but as regularity alone does not guarantee positive learning outcomes, this study also explored how respondents valued the learning activities. Based on our analysis, respondents valued the same learning activities for developing practice competence and their sense of social work identity. For both outcomes, the most useful activities involved receiving constructive feedback about progress, discussing and reflecting on skills, being assisted to learn new skills, observing social workers, critically reflecting on the social work role, and having time to discuss feelings and values about practice. Academic learning activities, such as linking theory to practice or linking professional Codes of Ethics to practice, which students engaged in less regularly, were perceived as 'less useful' by the Finnish social work students. These echo findings from the original Australian study (Cleak and Smith 2012), which reported that 53% of students did not have the opportunity to link practice to their Code of Ethics, and 51% did not have the opportunity to link theory to practice. Furthermore, the Northern Irish study (Cleak, Roulston, and Vreugdenhil 2016) reported that over one-third of students did not regularly have the opportunity to link social work theory and professional codes to social work practice in supervision. In all studies, these were the same activities that students did not receive regularly, which raises concerns about why students are not regularly facilitated to make these connections in supervision during placement. Chinnery and Beddoe (2011) suggested that task-focussed supervision, in an economic-driven climate, limits the opportunity for integrating theory to practice. Lefevre (2005) suggested that students were frustrated when field educators did not demonstrate adequate skills and abilities in these areas. However, while students were not receiving regular constructive feedback about their progress, this learning activity was perceived as the most useful activity for both developing practice competence and a sense of social work identity. This finding may be linked to students' perceptions around what constitutes 'feedback' or if assessment of student performance is summative or formative. Although practice teachers offer feedback at various assessment points throughout the placement, some students may not regard spontaneous or informal comments as feedback. Research conducted by Roulston and colleagues (Roulston et al. 2021) with Irish social work students who failed a placement, highlighted the need for students to regularly receive constructive feedback from their practice teacher throughout placement. As suggested earlier, this is a teaching activity that requires training and support.

The overall regularity of learning activities confirmed that Finnish social work students are generally provided with regular guidance on a large number of learning activities during placement. Moreover, studying the student's competence and sense of social work identity indicates that the majority of students feel adequately prepared for real world practice. However, when investigating the findings more closely, there was a slight connection with the lower regularity and not feeling competent or not having developed a sense of social work identity. The connection was not statistically significant, but calls for further analysis with a larger sample of students.

Discussing and reflecting on practice skills, being assisted to learn new skills and receiving feedback were the top three learning activities that respondents experienced during placement, which promoted their sense of social work identity and competence in a collaborative relationship with their practice teacher or supervisor on placement. Furthermore, 'observing others in practice' was ranked fourth for both identity and competence, which students naturally experience on placement. These findings highlight the continuum of learning that occurs between academic teaching and placements, and the importance of agency placements that allow students to observe qualified social workers. Previous research (Brodie and Williams 2013; Bogo 2015; Roulston, Cleak, and Vreugdenhil 2018; Flanagan and Wilson 2018) has highlighted the importance of students shadowing qualified social workers, to enhance their sense of professional identity.

There are certain limitations to this study. The participants form a purposive sample of the Tampere University social work students that entered practice placement during the study period. One other limitation is the uneven number of BSW and the MSW students who participated. However, the demographics of the students, who participated, were similar to those noted nationally in Finland (Lähteinen et al. 2017).

This paper explored Finnish social work students' learning activities provided on placement and how their regularity relates to the development of students' professional competence and sense of social work identity. This study contributed to the evidence base of previous international studies in the area. Still, further research is needed. Our findings also raised some significant differences between the BSW and MSW students, implying that the BSW students feel more competent and have a clearer understanding of social work at the completion of their placements than the MSW students. This could be due to the increased awareness during the MSW programme about the complicated nature of and their own limited knowledge about social work. As the comparison of the two groups is not the focus of this article, this aspect of the analysis should be afforded a separate investigation complemented with qualitative data to fully understand these differences. Altogether, growing evidence base can build our understanding on how to develop a good quality placement for students to achieve competencies they need as a qualified social worker.

## Note

1. Any other division resulted in an expected count to rise over 20%.

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