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Students' learning reflections when using works of fiction in social work education

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the analysis of 14 social work students' MA course assignments using Lucia Berlin's short story entitled 'Good and Bad'. Our focus is twofold: We ask 1) How do social work students describe their learning when analysing Berlin's short story; and 2) what kinds of skills do they identify as resulting from this learning? Our analysis indicates that social work students view the use of works of fiction in social work instruction as useful for their education in two key ways. First, in most cases, students found that analysing fiction enhanced their analytical strategies, such as advancing their ability to think critically and apply theoretical knowledge in practice. Second, students viewed the analysis of fiction as helpful in adopting skills relevant to social work practitioners, referring, for example, to emotional labour and to operating in situations that involve conflicting interpretations. We conclude that the use of fiction in social work education is beneficial when students are given explicit guidelines regarding how to place fiction into the context of academic theories, scientific knowledge and epistemological considerations. In addition, to enhance students' learning, encouraging students to self-reflect is vital to discussing their reflections and interpretations in face-to-face encounters.

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Introduction

Reading texts at the university level aims to construct meaning and arguments (deep learning), instead of committing factual information to memory (surface learning) (Roberts & Roberts, 2008, p. 125). Hence, university students need to adopt techniques to become 'good readers', since it is not self-evident that one reads in a way that involves analysing, synthesising and evaluating the material (Hegtvedt, 1991; Roberts & Roberts, 2008). Weber (2010, p. 358) has argued that using literary works of fiction (hereafter, fiction) in university instruction may enhance students' analytical skills and prove helpful to 'doing' theory in practice.

In this article, we analyse Finnish social work students' MA course assignments, in which they analysed Lucia Berlin's short story entitled 'Good and Bad' vis-à-vis the

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theoretical concept of intersectionality. Lucia Berlin's short story was chosen for the course assignment since it represents implicit and explicit portrayals of social categories and their intersections. In addition, length-wise this short story is relatively easy to read and analyse. According to Viggiani et al. (2005), fiction used in social science education should reflect complex interactions between individuals and societal structures, and address the complexity and relationality of human life. According to our interpretation, Berlin's short story meets these criteria quite well. In addition, it encourages multiple interpretations and can be read in various ways.

'Good and Bad' deals with issues such as social class, poverty, language, age, disability, ethnicity, gender and appearance as well as ideologies and social and political activism. The story takes place in Chile in the 1950s, and its central characters are a young woman named Adele, the first-person narrator of the story, and her college instructor Ethel Dawson. Both are American, but their worldviews differ radically from one another: whereas Adele lives a prosperous life, the instructor, Dawson, despised by her students, spends her free time as a social and political activist aiming to help people living in poverty and, ultimately, leading them to a social revolution. As the story advances, the instructor convinces Adele to accompany her during the weekends and take part in these activities. The young woman describes occurrences, different locations as well as her thoughts, feelings and actions in situations in which the instructor seems to be in many ways different and alienated from the poor Chilean communities whilst trying to 'do good'.

This article is structured as follows. First, we introduce a review of research on the use of fiction and intersectionality in university teaching. Since limited research exists on the use of fiction in social work education, we also reviewed previous studies from other social sciences, specifically sociology. Our review covers studies in which different forms of literature—such as novels, short stories, poetry, autobiographies and science fiction—have been utilised. In previous studies in general, little attention has been paid to students' own accounts on the topic. Thus, we aim to fill this gap by examining students' reflections on their own learning when analysing Berlin's short story. Our research questions for this article are:

- (1) How do social work students describe their learning when analysing Berlin's short story?
- (2) What kinds of skills do they identify as a result?

Following our literature review, we introduce our study design, data and the analytical process. Third, we discuss our core findings under two themes, labelled 'adopting analytical learning strategies' and 'adopting useful skills for social work practitioners'. Finally, we discuss our findings and identify future research needs.

Literature review on the use of fiction in university teaching

University instructors have used fiction to teach specific concepts and theoretical ideas to students. Literary works of fiction have previously been used in the social sciences when teaching many social work relevant topics, such as stratification and inequality (Fitzgerald, 1992; Laz, 2020; Moran, 1999), social justice (Viggiani et al., 2005), labelling (Cnaan, 1989; Monroe, 2006), mental health stigma (Lewis, 2004), family issues (Cosbey, 1997; Hall, 2000)

and effective leadership (Hafford-Letchfield & Harper, 2014). Previous research is rather uniform, arguing that the analysis of fiction fosters social scientific reasoning, conceptual understanding and the 'sociological imagination' (Castellano et al., 2008; Fitzgerald, 1992; Hendershott & Wright, 1993; Laz, 2020). In addition, the analysis of fiction appears to nurture students' analytical skills, critical and creative thinking as well as problem-solving abilities (Castellano et al., 2008; Cosbey, 1997; Laz, 2020; Weber, 2010).

The vast majority of previous research focused on instructors' perspectives on the use of literature. Some studies, however, reported student feedback, which tended to be encouraging and positive: students perceived fiction as helping them relate to 'real-life' situations and made theories comprehensible when 'seeing' them 'in action' (Cnaan, 1989; Hafford-Letchfield & Harper, 2014; Hall, 2000; Hartman, 2005; Sullivan, 1982; Wyant & Bowen, 2018). The use of fiction in teaching may be particularly helpful when the primary course readings consist of dense, abstract and historically dislocated academic texts possibly written in a disaffecting and alienating language (Weber, 2010). Thus, as argued by Moran (1999), fiction can 'deacademicise' abstract jargon.

In previous studies, the analysis of fiction was implemented primarily in introductorylevel courses (Castellano et al., 2008; Fitzgerald, 1992; Hartman, 2005; Laz, 2020; Link & Sullivan, 1989; Sullivan, 1982). Yet, reading fiction has been used as means to achieve a variety of pedagogical goals, such as being able to comprehend social constructionist theory, improve analytical capabilities and identify and apply macro-level social theories (Castellano et al., 2008; Lewis, 2004). Previous research also identified a range of practical implementation strategies and tips, such as seminars (Cnaan, 1989), roundtable discussions (Monroe, 2006), student-led online and in-person book clubs (Lewis, 2004; Wyant & Bowen, 2018) as well as combining written assignments with in-class group work (Hall, 2000; Weber, 2010). Previous findings also recognised that assignments focused on analysing fiction should include detailed instructions and guidelines on how to conduct the analysis by providing students with examples of data coding, thereby concretely helping them to learn different types of analytical skills (Castellano et al., 2008; also Sullivan, 1982; Viggiani et al., 2005; Wyant & Bowen, 2018). Specifically, reading guidelines can help students process the material, and may facilitate students' 'deep reading' strategies (Hafford-Letchfield & Harper, 2014; Roberts & Roberts, 2008). In addition, instructors can guide their students by providing basic information in advance about the storyline, author, social context or the phenomenon the text addresses (Cosbey, 1997; Hartman, 2005; Laz, 2020).

Mendoza et al. (2012) identified the potential of fiction to enhance social work students' learning experiences and self-reflection skills by enabling their imaginative thinking and critical consciousness within social work practice (see also Hardy, 2005; Monroe, 2006; Taylor, 2008). For instance, fiction may question existing social arrangements and help to adopt a critical stance towards 'taken-for-granted' and 'truthful' knowledge (Laz, 2020). Hence, social work students can analyse how social realities, characters and phenomena are constructed and portrayed in literature (Cnaan, 1989).

Scourfield and Taylor (2014) also identified the specific pedagogical potential of the analysis of literature in social work courses as a means of facilitating learning. Fiction may help to draw upon one's own life experiences and disclose personal stories, familiarise oneself with different interpretations of the same phenomenon and reflect upon the connections between these interpretations and theories (Lewis, 2004; Weber, 2010).

Literature can also encapsulate psychological phenomena such as emotions (Cnaan, 1989) or assist in reflecting upon one's own reactions whilst reading about different life stories (Tapola-Haapala & Heino, 2020; Turner, 2013). Applying theories to practice through the analysis of fiction may foster the development of empathy among social work students and help them to sympathise with the actions of individuals in diverse situations coming from a variety of backgrounds (Chrisler, 1990; Fitzgerald, 1992; Mendoza et al., 2012; Tapola-Haapala & Heino, 2020; Viggiani et al., 2005). In addition, such learning may assist social work students in developing sensibility and self-awareness, perceiving their clients in a holistic manner (Turner, 1991) and applying moral reasoning (Hafford-Letchfield & Harper, 2014). Fiction can also be used to identify social work students' shared reactions and emotions as well as reflecting upon issues relevant to social work, such as professional conduct, social worker's own underlying values related to social welfare or taboo issues such as child abuse (Cnaan, 1989; Link & Sullivan, 1989).

Regardless of the possible benefits of fiction, it is not self-evident that it occupies an established position within social work curriculum. Tapola-Haapala and Heino (2020), for instance, identified structural challenges that social work instructors associate with the use of fiction in university teaching. These challenges include instructors' lack of time needed to adopt new teaching methods and their pedagogical competence as well as a limited flexibility in the curriculum.

Teaching intersectionality

Intersectionality is generally defined as the simultaneous interplay of multiple social categories, such as race or ethnicity, social class and gender (Crenshaw, 1989). In social work research, intersectionality has been employed, for example, in order to enhance reflexivity related to difference (Crawford, 2012), to study normalisation processes in family social work (Sawyer, 2012) or the everyday experiences of migration (Heino et al., 2020; Kara, 2016) and to develop culturally sensitive approaches to social work research and practices (Valkonen & Wallenius-Korkalo, 2016). Intersectionality is considered relevant to social work because it can enhance an understanding of how different structures and institutions frame individual agency and everyday life, and prompt social workers to engage in self-reflection related to their own position within hierarchical social categories (Mattsson, 2014).

When teaching intersectionality, the importance of active learning methods that help students to integrate theory with practice are often emphasised (see Robinson et al., 2016). In order to foster this, case examples (Alvarez-Hernandez, 2020) as well as exercises in which students reflect upon situations from other people's perspectives have been employed (Gardner & McKinzie, 2020; Robinson et al., 2016). For example, within various disciplines such as literary studies, an intersectional analysis of literature is currently rather common (see, e.g. Alonso-Breto, 2015; Lester, 2014; Moulaison Sandy et al., 2017; Palo & Manderstedt, 2019), possibly supporting the use of fiction among social work students as well as when teaching intersectionality. According to Mahrouse (2016), suitable creative works can, in conjunction with some other readings, 'help students achieve an understanding of transnational and intersectional feminism in ways that effectively teach about the simultaneity of identities, bodies, and institutions within globalization' (p. 238). Baker et al. (2019), in turn, have discussed how art-based

activities such as writing poetry may help teacher candidates to examine intersectional identities.

Study design and data

Our analysis draws from a Finnish MA-level social work course held in 2020, during which we carried out a study on the use of fiction in social work teaching. The six-week course, obligatory for students, focused on various perspectives on intersectionality and its connection to social work. We initially planned to complete in-depth small-group discussions with students on their analyses of Berlin's short story and to tape-record these discussions. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, altered these plans, and instead of using interview material, we analysed the students' written assignments as our empirical data. In total, 14 students completed the course assignments, which included a 5-page analysis of fiction using Berlin's short story and a 10-page essay in which students defined intersectionality and reflected upon what they had learned during the course. Students were instructed to write their assignments according to the abovementioned page counts.

A pass/fail grading system for the fiction analysis assignment and numerical grading system for the essay were applied. We used both of these assignments as the material for our analysis. We asked all students for their written permission to use these materials for our research and all of them gave their consent. No ethical review was sought for our study. However, we have followed the general ethical guidelines on the responsible conduct set by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity. We use anonymised extracts of the students' assignments in the results that follow. The extracts have been translated into English by the fourth author.

In the analysis of fiction assignments, students were asked to structure the paper in a specific format so that they could identify the theoretical relevance of the short story. We did not ask students to simply identify intersections alone, but to also analyse their own thoughts and emotions in relation to the story. In addition, students were instructed to reflect upon the content of the story using its events, characters and locations as well as its style, plot structure and title. We also asked students to reflect upon their own thoughts regarding the use of fiction as a component of social work education. In our instructions, we posed several open-ended questions to guide the students' analysis, such as: What kinds of descriptions of poverty, class, privilege, ideology, entitlement and gender can you identify? How do these social categories intersect? Are they in conflict with or do they strengthen each other?

Analysis

All of the authors read through the data. Overall, the student evaluations of the analysis of the short story were positive, with the vast majority of students recommending the incorporation of fiction into future social work courses. Some, in fact, stated that they generally had little time to read anything other than academic texts and were, therefore, pleased to read something different.

The first author began the analysis by collecting all of the data passages dealing with students' reflections on analysing fiction into a separate file for further in-depth reading. During this process, the first author used qualitative content analysis to first open code and, then, to organise these data passages into content-related categories as part of her abstraction and meaning-making process (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

Next, together all of the authors discussed the initial findings and interpretations in an attempt to check whether the interpretations were shared, and all authors applied their critical understanding to the results. During this process, we started to compare and contrast the data-driven findings with pre-existing knowledge, make shared interpretations and narrow down the focus of our analysis. As a result, we organised our findings under two primary categories, labelling these 'adopting analytical learning strategies' and 'adopting useful skills for social work practitioners'. We next present our key results under these two corresponding headings.

Adopting analytical learning strategies

The first category we identified relates to students' descriptions of 'adopting analytical learning strategies' while analysing fiction. Here, we refer to deep learning strategies that foster understanding, meaning-making and finding connections between different aspects of phenomena (e.g. Biggs, 1987; Marton & Säljö, 1976; Roberts & Roberts, 2008).

In general, students described how the use of fiction helped to introduce different lifestyles, cultures and societal settings through which students can 'travel' to different locations and observe different worldviews and feelings. Students recounted that the analysis of fiction rendered intersectionality more 'alive', since it was contextualised for them in an everyday and concrete way. In addition, students reported enhanced learning when 'real-world' examples of intersectionality were available to reflect upon, making the theory more 'concrete' and accessible.

I think fiction can help to concretise theories. As a reader, you can empathise and you can let the story take you through phenomena, such as social class differences, because they are described in such concrete ways. You can relate to the descriptions and understand what, for example, poverty and gender division are about. L7

Students generally described the analysis of fiction as helpful in fostering their critical thinking. In particular, the analysis of fiction appeared to provide students alternative and novel ways of learning and reasoning. In their assignments, all students provided their own, varied interpretations related to the story and its illustrations of intersectionality. Typically, students analysed the characteristics of and the category-bound activities performed by the characters in Berlin's short story. Some students focused on the author's aims by examining representation and portrayal. Others, however, analysed the truthfulness of the story—that is, whether the story was credible and to what extent the characters seemed relatable. These 'realistic' accounts included analyses of the intentions, thoughts, attitudes and feelings of the characters. By contrast, some students wrote that they did not have sufficient cultural and historical knowledge to assess the story. Thus, they described the story as somewhat alien to them (see also Laz, 2020, p. 58).

The analysis of fiction was often portrayed as 'interesting', but also 'challenging'. Some students reported that it encouraged them to engage more with other course materials. However, the lack of face-to-face discussions and shared reflections were listed as hampering the full potential of adopting such analytical learning strategies. In addition,



structured guidelines, reading instructions and an existing theoretical framework were identified as key factors of the learning experience.

I found it interesting to look at intersectionality through fiction and the short story at hand. Although I read the story as fiction, I also found myself thinking about it as real-life events. ... I think that these assignments provide a good change in the social work curriculum and also challenge you to think in a different way, as compared, for example, to reading academic articles. . . . I find that it is important to have a clear framework for these kinds of assignments, because without it, it can be very difficult to analyse. L4

In most of the accounts, the analysis of fiction was portrayed as aiding the comprehension of the theoretical discussions and the empirical research used during the course. Thus, the assignment was described as a way of deepening an understanding on how to apply theory in practice.

Analysing fiction was described by most of the students as supporting their learning, since it provoked more ideas than simply reading traditional academic texts alone. The analysis of fiction, thus, worked for some students as a thought-provoking and meaningful assignment, leading to 'out-of-the-box' thinking. The traditional teaching methods were portrayed in these descriptions as somewhat tedious, with rigid instructions related to writing and leaving little room for one's own creative thinking.

I believe this short story provoked more thoughts in me than any text I have read in a long time. This was also a nice and enjoyable reading experience, and I am convinced that through analysing this text I learned more than I have done recently by reading other books. I think this is because here I was able to really think, whereas in other assignments I feel I am generally primarily expected to adopt and absorb. L6

In this extract, the assignment was described as helping the student to think about their own position, not just reference other thinkers' texts and existing theories. Some students described how reading the story multiple times helped them to form a deeper understanding of it, allowing them to find layers in the narrative and re-assess how the characters were represented. As a result, some students had engaged in a process of making re-interpretations. This process also helped the students to identify a development in their analytical reasoning as well as self-criticise their own attitudes, prejudices and acts of labelling.

I could have analysed the short story from many different angles. The more I read it, the more I got out of it, and I could have written about it from yet another point of view. It is interesting how one's own presumptions and thoughts shape the ways one reads the story and what one gets out of it. L2

Overall, in their assignments students were able to identify several links between intersectionality and the short story. However, some students were unsure whether they had analysed the story in an 'appropriate way'. Furthermore, some students reported being 'stuck' with the assignment, since intersectionality remained a vague, difficult-to-grasp and impossible-to-approach topic to them. Thus, some did not know how to scrutinise the short story, spent time procrastinating and doubted their analytical skills. Whilst some students felt that the assignment had enabled them to concretise and invigorate their understanding of intersectionality, others expressed intimidation when faced with



analysing fiction, and, thus, combining an analysis of fiction with a complex theoretical discussion was experienced as an excessively demanding task.

The mere idea of this assignment felt impossible. What if I am not able to analyse fiction; what if I am not able to notice all of the nuances, see behind the text or argue my point of view sufficiently. L14

In general, the students also identified potential limitations when using fiction as a means to enhance learning. Some students pointed out that not all stories are 'factual', and may conflict with research and scientific knowledge. This was portrayed as a 'threat' to learning, and some students emphasised that fictional texts should be read critically and accompanied by academic journal articles and textbooks. Moreover, according to students, fiction may 'blind' and 'blur' the reader if critical perspectives, self-reflectivity and analytical learning strategies are not applied.

Adopting useful skills for social work practitioners

The second category we identified relates to students' descriptions of adopting useful skills considering their role as social workers when analysing fiction. Many students expressed that the analytical process of fiction supported them as social work practitioners, since the assignment helped them to interpret their own actions, non-actions and the uses of power and language from new perspectives.

In particular, students described this kind of exercise as helpful when meeting clients with various backgrounds. Thus, students viewed the analysis of fiction as supporting their future as social workers in understanding diverse situations within social work practice.

Fiction can offer versatile points of view vis-à-vis the phenomena encountered in social work, and, through stories, one can relate better to different phenomena. Stories can increase one's understanding of different phenomena, and, therefore, create a better and deeper understanding of clients' situations. L5

Some students described how the analysis of fiction helped them to identify the ways in which social workers use interpretation on the frontlines of their practical work, and how these interpretations are entangled with power relationships. Students reflected on the influence of time, context and the multiplicity of perspectives in such interpretations. For example, they identified how a work of fiction may be employed to analyse multiple interpretations present in social work documentation. The students stated, however, that the analysis of different interpretations would require interactions with other students.

As I write this analysis, I think about my interpretations. It reminds me of my work as a social worker. . . . I make interpretations about service users and their situations based upon the documentation written by other social workers. And, when I meet the service users, I am surprised by how different my own interpretations often are, how I pay attention to other things and how I consider other things as relevant. Discussing this assignment together with the group would have been an interesting glimpse into the world of observations and interpretations. I believe, in fact, that the interpretations would have been numerous and all different. L11

In their assignments, students often identified the need to discuss their analysis in order to achieve a more nuanced level of reflection and to improve the application of theoretical aspects of the course to the analysis of fiction.

Generally, students viewed the analysis of fiction as capable of helping social work students to identify their own feelings and to prepare themselves for the emotional labour present in social work, such as when encountering challenging interactional situations and contradictory emotions. Some students, for example, reported various uncomfortable emotions arising from the story, including second-hand embarrassment, anger, frustration, amusement, resentment and distress. Furthermore, students recounted that analysing fiction can assist in developing empathy towards service users. In addition, students described good fiction as something that evokes emotions and, therefore, is suitable for inclusion in the social work curriculum.

Students also mentioned the prospect of using fiction and other forms of creative art that is, photographs, paintings, drawings, music, theatre, films and song lyrics—as a means of diversifying social work practice. Creative methods, including the use of fiction, were presented as 'therapeutic' and 'empowering', since they may ease interactions with clients compared to merely 'sitting in an office'. In particular, creative methods were depicted as useful when working with groups.

However, students also pinpointed certain risks to using fiction in social work curriculum, such as the strengthening of unanalytical 'heroic' portrayals of social workers as well as other depictions described as 'harmful'.

[Fiction] can create an understanding of social work as a heroic activity and profession, of which the aim is to somehow save people who are in vulnerable positions. L8

Thus, students emphasised the importance of choosing material requiring critical reflection of the social work profession and practices as well as service user identities.

Conclusions

To conclude, the analysis of fiction was considered by Finnish MA social work students as useful to their learning in two crucial ways. First, according to the students, the analysis of fiction can support students' active and analytical learning processes and their comprehension of theoretical concepts and knowledge relevant to social work introduced to them in everyday and concrete ways, which is consistent with previous research (e.g. Cnaan, 1989; Hafford-Letchfield & Harper, 2014; Turner, 2013; Viggiani et al., 2005). In particular, our results are in line with the argument that fiction helps students to 'do' theory in practice (Weber, 2010), as well as nurture students' creative thinking (Castellano et al., 2008; Cosbey, 1997; Laz, 2020). However, some students expressed difficulties in linking the textual material to theoretical knowledge. Therefore, it seems that face-to-face in-class discussions and detailed guidelines remain important for students' self-reflective learning experiences (see also Hafford-Letchfield & Harper, 2014; Roberts & Roberts, 2008). As a means of enhancing critical thinking, the short story used in this particular assignment worked well. Moreover, because of its concise length, it could be read multiple times if necessary. Open-ended questions designed to guide the students' analyses also proved useful, since most students employed them to structure their assignments. Furthermore, most students stated that the short story was a useful and welcome addition to the academic literature assigned during the

Second, students identified the potential of the analysis of fiction in social work teaching to strengthen the skills that social work practitioners need in their frontline work. For example, the use of fiction was portrayed as beneficial to preparing oneself for emotional labour (see also Chrisler, 1990; Cnaan, 1989; Fitzgerald, 1992; Mendoza et al., 2012; Tapola-Haapala & Heino, 2020; Viggiani et al., 2005), writing and reading social work documentation and practicing group social work. Most importantly, students' reflections associated with how their own as well as other social workers' interpretations can be reflected upon and discussed with the help of reading and analysing fiction. Thus, students identified fiction's potential to illustrate and concretise the relationships between theory and social work practice. In previous research, Fagerström (2016) has suggested that reading novels, writing about them and other's reflections as well as discussing interpretations amongst practitioners in a structured way can foster critical reflection of assumptions and stereotypes, increase awareness of the differences between viewpoints and guide considerations of phenomena from both the individual and structural perspectives. Our results indicate similar outcomes. Fiction combined with carefully deliberated assignments may also foster reflection necessary to practical social work. These include, for example, reflections on one's own actions, non-actions and the use of power and language.

Another benefit to using fiction dealt with its potential to introduce phenomena and spheres of life otherwise unfamiliar to the reader. This, however, also raises critical questions on what, from a factual point of view, are students and social workers actually learning when they read fiction. It may be that these texts in some way strengthen stereotypical conceptions of phenomena faced in social work (Tapola-Haapala & Heino, 2020). However, fiction that presents people in this way may also be employed by putting it under explicit critical analysis across an individual-structure continuum.

Our study carries limitations. First, we have concentrated only on one specific course with a relatively small dataset. Another limitation is that our data included obligatory non-anonymised course assignments, some of which were also graded. It is possible that students reflected upon their experiences by telling us as instructors what they thought we wanted to hear. Hence, in future the use of fiction should also be studied within noncredit bearing teaching. A third shortcoming of our study is that we did not attempt any virtual sessions with the students in which we could discuss the story. The possibility of reflecting upon the story together might bring an added value to online courses in which fiction is used.

To conclude, we identify a clear need for future studies that use students' argumentative interview talk as a data source. In addition, comparative research designs could be utilised in order to better understand the learning outcomes and potential problems students encounter when using fiction in social work education. Future social work research could also focus on analysing fiction and theories together with frontline practitioners. Our results indicate that this could help social workers to implement theoretical knowledge in their daily practice.



Disclosure of potential conflicts of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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