

## **Suitability for Professional Practice: Assessing and Developing Moral Character in Social Work Education.**

### **Abstract**

This article considers the importance of an explicit focus upon the 'character' of social work applicants and students in debates regarding suitability for professional education and practice. Drawing upon the growing body of literature concerning gate-keeping decisions and literature exploring the relevance of virtue ethics for social work, this article examines the benefits of an approach that foregrounds the assessment and development of moral character. The discussion is located within the context of the most recent reforms to social work education within England, whilst recognising the international relevance of these debates. It is argued that incorporating an approach informed by virtue ethics has potential to bridge traditional fault-lines within selection debates that have focussed upon the tensions between a widening access perspective and a focus upon academic ability. Crucially, this article examines the curriculum and pedagogic issues arising from a commitment to provide opportunities to develop moral character and virtue. The article argues that a dual focus upon selection and pedagogic issues, with an explicit focus upon character throughout, is critical to the development of wise, effective and virtuous social workers able to exercise sound judgment and wisdom across a range of practice contexts.

Key words: Admission, selection, suitability, moral character, virtue, social work, social work student.

## Introduction

Despite several years of almost continual 'reform' within England<sup>1</sup>, expressions of dissatisfaction with the quality of graduates from initial qualifying social work courses continue to feature in public discourse about the profession. Assumptions continue to be made about the cause of the 'problem'. Blame is frequently located with the perceived poor quality of entrants to courses and the failure of universities to provide effective preparation for entry to the profession. The spotlight upon admissions processes has intensified following concerns regarding the 'failure to fail' unsuitable students (Social Work Task Force [SWTF], 2009; Finch and Taylor, 2013; Tam and Coleman, 2011; Tam, Coleman and Boey, 2012). The on-going focus upon entry standards is further illustrated by the development of a new work-based model of social work training, specifically designed to attract high quality graduates (BBC, 2013), even before the most recent reforms with their focus upon an increased 'calibre of entry' have been fully implemented.

The recently formed College of Social Work (TCSW), the professional body for social work within England, requires that universities recruit applicants:

... most likely to become confident, effective and safe practitioners, eligible for registration with HPC (*sic*) as a social worker and who are able to uphold a positive image of the social work profession. This includes recognising the importance of building a diverse group of professionals who are reflective of the communities and localities they will be serving. (TCSW 2011, p5)

This illustrates the potential fault-lines within the selection process: successful applicants must be representative of diverse communities and must also be those most likely to become excellent practitioners upon completion of their social work degree. Attention has been previously drawn to a tension between the privileging of intellectual ability, evidenced by academic qualifications, and the recognition that for social work, social justice concerns, 'non-academic criteria' and personal qualities are equally important in the selection of entrants to the profession (Dillon, 2010; Ross, 2010). This article argues that it is timely to re-focus upon the character of student social workers, and that such a focus and post-Reform requirements of increased levels of academic ability are not competing priorities to the extent previously suggested. Indeed, such a polarised approach risks underplaying the significance of characteristics such as sound judgment and wisdom that are surely dependent upon both intellectual strength and moral character. This article therefore argues for a refocusing upon character as a necessary addition to assessments of intellectual ability rather than as an alternative.

This article begins with an exploration of the value of a more explicit focus upon 'character', drawing upon literature that has virtue or moral character as a primary concern, as well as literature concerned with gate-keeping debates. Next, the article examines the extent to

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<sup>1</sup> Recent reforms (arising from the Social Work Task Force and Social Work Reform Board) have been England-based processes, rather than having been applicable to the UK as a whole.

which current regulatory frameworks allow space for such a focus. After outlining some key tensions within debates about the selection of social work students, this article explores what a virtue and moral character-focussed approach might contribute to such debates. Finally, given the importance of seeing the development and assessment of suitability as a 'whole course' issue (Gibbs and Blakely, 2000), this article considers the curriculum and pedagogic implications of such a focus.

## **Methodology**

This article arises from the author's interest in debates about suitability for social work education and from involvement in the Social Work Reform Board (SWRB) processes. During these activities, the author was struck by the emphasis placed upon the 'person' rather than their 'actions' by many stake-holders. This observation coincided with the author's role as course leader on a qualifying social work course. In that role, completion of references for final year students frequently required comments to be made in respect of the student's 'character' as distinct from their role-competence.

The aim of this research was to explore the following questions:

- How desirable and feasible is a focus upon moral character within social work education admissions and selection processes?
- Given that admissions processes are not infallible, what are the key curriculum (content and process) implications of an explicit focus upon the development of moral character and virtue?

Searches for relevant English language literature were conducted via electronic bibliographical databases such as SCOPUS (V4), ASSIA and ERIC. Search terms included: 'social work' (or 'social work education') AND 'selection' OR 'admission'; 'suitability' OR 'fitness to practise' AND 'social work'; 'character' AND 'social work'; 'curriculum' OR 'pedagogy' and various combination of these terms. Initial searches produced just over 80 potential publications for review and citation tracking identified approximately 20 additional publications. The searches were not restricted by year or place of publication given the relatively small number of directly relevant publications. Whilst the majority of publications originated from North America, UK and Australia, some focussed upon the South African context. Publications were generally excluded from further consideration if they had not been through a process of peer review. However, given the focus of this article, 'grey' literature from regulatory and professional bodies and that emerging from the SWTF and the SWRB processes was also included.

## **The significance of 'character'**

Selection for social work courses is an inherently ethical activity (Cowburn and Nelson, 2008) given the impact of decisions, especially upon applicants who may already be marginalised members of society. Furthermore, the increased attention within literature to the moral nature of professional life highlights the importance of considering the essential characteristics of entrants to the profession more explicitly. Clark states that:

Since a professional's competence to carry out even the most instrumental tasks cannot be conveniently excised from their moral capacity and personality as a whole, it also means that criteria regarding the moral personality of the professional are relevant to the processes of recruitment, training and certification of professional suitability and competence (2006, p. 83).

McLaughlin (2007) argues that the renewed focus upon the private lives of workers within professional Codes and associated increased level of surveillance amounts to an intrusion of private life. However, the possibility and desirability of drawing a neat dividing line between the public and private spheres of a professional's life are much debated (Wiles, 2011). Indeed, Clark (2006, p.185) suggests that such 'intrusion' merely reflects the 'burden' that accompanies the 'privilege' of the very particular nature of the social work role. Further, expectations extend beyond the usual scope of employment contracts and social relationships given the higher degree of trust required in professional and helping relationships (Banks, 2004; Clark, 2006).

Clark (2006) argues that a focus upon the moral character of the professional has been sharpened through regulatory changes. The focus is said to be less upon competent actions or conduct and more upon the inner character of the individual and is arguably based upon a virtue ethics perspective. Although there are many variants of virtue ethics (Banks 2004, pp. 54-5), they share a focus upon the inner character or 'disposition' of the moral agent rather than upon the outcome of action or the rule-following behaviour of the social worker. As Gibson (2003, p23) notes, professional morality involves much more than following a rule or 'Code'. From this perspective a person practises the virtue of honesty not because of a rule, but because they wish to be a truthful person. The danger of evaluating the morality of an act on the basis of the outcome is recognised by McBeath and Webb when they highlight the role played by 'luck' within professional practice (2002, p1026). From this perspective, it is the moral character of the individual therefore that, after training and education, becomes the 'stable reference point' or an internal 'moral compass' that precedes action. This is not to deny the importance of outcomes for individuals and organisations, and clearly virtue or character alone is not sufficient for effective social work practice. Further, rules and principles remain important given that not all practitioners will become virtuous, and even the most morally upright professional must be able to abide by, and challenge where needed, rules and regulations governing professional life. The perspective taken in this article is, therefore, that a virtuous disposition, developed through training and practice is necessary but not sufficient for professional practice.

Defining virtues, McBeath and Webb explain that:

The virtues are the acquired inner qualities of humans – character – the possession of which, if applied in due measure, will typically contribute to the realization of the good life or ‘eudaimonia’ (2002, p1015).

Such an approach does not therefore require that social workers are ‘saints’ but merely that they practice at least a moderately virtuous life (McBeath and Webb, 2002). It is perfectly possible to have too much of a good thing, hence the significance of the reference to ‘due measure’. For example, an excess of compassion may result in a difficulty managing the emotional impact of social work or an over-identification with the service user’s situation. Another important aspect of this approach is the view that such inner qualities are acquired, albeit after a lengthy process of instruction and learning from practical work, rather than being innate. Such a position creates challenges for decision-making in terms of ‘how much’ of a particular virtue or characteristic is needed, at which stage of professional education. However, even if we accept that moral character and virtue develop in the way referred to above, the early contact that social work students have with people in vulnerable situations requires that a threshold level is identified as a pre-condition for entry to professional education along with an ability and willingness to engage in a learning process.

Importantly, it is recognised that virtues are socially constructed elements of character and therefore we need to be alert to both universal and context-specific traits of character (Clark, 2006). This may go some way to address concerns regarding the need for context-specific virtues to be recognised rather than assuming all are universally applicable (Banks, 2008; McBeath and Webb, 2002). Authors have identified a range of virtues relevant to social work. Houston (2012, p.665) refers to courage, honesty, truthfulness, loyalty, wisdom and kindness. Banks explores the complexity of regarding ‘integrity’ as a single virtue, but suggests that it lies in between the two excesses of arrogance and weak-will (2010, p2174). In their evaluation of a Scandinavian workfare programme, Marthinsen and Skjefstad (2011) propose that ‘recognition’ should be considered as an important virtue within social work. Drawing upon Honneth’s work on the ‘struggle for recognition’, where the ‘struggle’ involves practical relations with ourselves and others in order to achieve self-confidence and esteem, they argue that recognition requires that professionals accept the hopes and aspirations of others on an equal basis rather than attempting to transform them into model citizens.. Echoing the arguments of McBeath and Webb (2002), Marthinsen and Skjefstad report clients’ views that the qualities of the worker made a significant difference to the experience of ‘care’ and as such, acting out of duty or obligation rather than as a result of an internal and virtuous motive, serves to weaken the underlying relationship required for positive social work (2011, p208).

Given the importance of regulatory frameworks within which social work and social work courses are located, this article will now consider the extent to which current regulatory contexts require, enable, or restrict a focus upon the moral character of those seeking to enter the profession.

## **Regulatory Contexts: space for a consideration of character?**

The decision-making process at the point of entry to social work courses requires adherence to multiple regulatory requirements. At an international level, the IFSW requirement that courses select applicants who are representative of the community they serve highlights the importance of diversity and breadth of access to the social work profession. IFSW expectations sit alongside national regulatory and professional body requirements and this section of the present article examines the extent to which such requirements enable an explicit focus upon the moral character of applicants and students. Although other UK countries continue to be regulated by Care Councils with broadly similar Codes of Practice and requirements, in England, the General Social Care Council's regulatory functions were transferred to the re-named Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) in 2012. Significantly, the HCPC is an outcome-focussed regulator whereby threshold standards at the point of qualification are the primary focus, with 'best practice' being the remit of the newly established College of Social Work (TCSW).

Approved courses within England are required to meet the Standards of Education and Training (SETS) that are cross-profession standards established by the HCPC (HCPC, 2012c). The SETS require that the admissions process ensures that parties receive the information needed to make informed decisions, echoing TCSW requirements to ensure that applicants are alerted to the professional nature of the course in publicity and during the selection stage. Universities are also required to undertake a criminal convictions check (SET 2.3) and must apply appropriate selection criteria including any professional entry standards. This latter point is significant as it appears to elevate the role of TCSW standards and good practice guidance to a more significant status than some have thought to be the case given the optional nature of endorsement of courses by TCSW. Further, course providers must enable students on approved courses to meet profession-specific Standards of Proficiency (SOPs) (HCPC, 2012d).

The SOPs (s. 3.1) specify that registrants must be able to maintain their 'fitness to practise' and maintain high standards of personal and professional conduct (s. 3.4). HCPC define 'fitness to practise' in the following terms:

When we say that someone is 'fit to practise', we mean that they have the skills, knowledge, *character* and health to do their job safely and effectively. (HCPC, 2006, p. 3, emphasis added)

The reference to 'character' is again apparent in the account of the registration process for qualified social workers:

We must check the character of everyone that applies to join our Register....This means that when a person applies for registration, they must tell us about any criminal convictions or cautions they may have. ([HCPC, nd](#)).

In addition, details of any action taken against the applicant by another regulator must be provided and all applicants for registration must provide a character reference from a professional person that certifies that they know of no reason why the applicant will not be able to practise with honesty and integrity.

Although student social workers in England are not registered with HCPC during their studies, they are considered to be working towards the relevant registration requirements (HCPC, 2012a). As in the previous Care Council Codes, it is required that registrants:

...keep high standards of personal conduct, as well as professional conduct. You should be aware that poor conduct outside of your professional life may still affect someone's confidence in you and your profession (HCPC, 2012b, p.3).

And further that:

You must justify the trust that other people place in you by acting with honesty and integrity at all times. You must not get involved in any behaviour or activity which is likely to damage the public's confidence in you or your profession (HCPC, 2012b, p.14)

Although the wording of HCPC requirements is largely conduct-focussed, the quotations above highlight the importance placed, albeit in a somewhat reductionist way, upon the character of the professional. However, the lack of direct references to the details of *the kind of person* that a social worker should *be* rather than how they should *act* is in stark contrast to Codes in some other countries. For example, the Swedish Code (Akademiker Forbundet SSR, 2006) explores 'what sort of person ought I to be' (p7) and 'ethical traits of character' (p12). The guidance for selection processes produced by TCSW (2011) is based upon the recently designed Professional Capability Framework (PCF)<sup>2</sup> and this career-long framework includes expected standards across several domains that applicants will need to demonstrate in order to obtain a place on a TCSW endorsed course.<sup>3</sup> These standards highlight the expectation that candidates will demonstrate self-awareness, empathy, are aware of the nature of social work practice and have an awareness of the impact of their own values on others and the ability to communicate clearly and accurately. However, the focus here remains upon *doing* more than *being* and possibly represents a missed opportunity to more explicitly incorporate a clear selection, assessment and developmental focus upon the *being* of prospective social workers.

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<sup>2</sup> For information about the PCF and the expectations at each career stage, including entry to qualifying courses: <http://www.tcsw.org.uk/pcf.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> Although it is the regulatory body (HCPC) that formally approves social work courses in England, course providers may additionally choose to apply for TCSW endorsement. This is intended as a recognition of good practice and implementation of sector guidance

## Recent selection dilemmas/issues

The international research base in respect of selection debates has expanded significantly in recent years. However, this has largely served to highlight what remains unknown about the associations between assessments at the point of entry courses and 'success' in subsequent practice as a social worker. Although attempts have been made (Tam and Coleman, 2011) to isolate factors leading to later suitability and unsuitability, these have been relatively inconclusive and difficult to operationalize.

The potentially transformative nature of social work education, and consequently a risk-taking approach to selection decisions, needs to be balanced with the access that even student social workers have to members of society in vulnerable circumstances (TCSW 2011). The expansion of Higher Education (HE) has been significant globally and the explicit social justice orientation of such widening access policies and the resulting tension inherent in the professional gatekeeping role are explored in a growing range of literature arising from different contexts (Dillon, 2007; Ross, 2010). The recent focus upon academic qualifications within the reform processes in England may in part be a reaction to a previous focus upon 'experience' as the 'gold standard' and an acknowledgement that experience pre-course seemed not to be predictive of later success (Author's own, 2008), with prior academic achievement being the most consistently identified predictor of completion of social work courses.

During the work of the SWTF and SWRB in England, attention was drawn to the lower average entry grades of social work applicants compared to those for courses such as medicine and nursing. However, the lower average UCAS tariff<sup>4</sup> points for social work courses may be somewhat misleading as the tariff is not applicable to Access to HE courses taken by a significant proportion of applicants (Author's own, 2010). This is not to deny the significance of concerns about entry standards nor to deny the importance of increasing standards as one element of raising the image of the profession. Interestingly, even before the impact of the recent reforms are known, UCAS statistics show that there has been an increasing correlation between higher academic grades, as measured in tariff points, and likelihood of securing an offer for a place on a social work course (UCAS, 2013).

In recognition of the fact that qualifications are not the only indicators of intellectual ability and formal achievements may be affected by a number of factors, authors have highlighted the importance of contextualising formal attainment (Ross, 2010; Dillon, 2007). Within the UK, it is expected that UCAS contextual data is taken into account during the admissions

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<sup>4</sup> UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) is the central application clearing house for UK undergraduate courses. Post-graduate social work courses are also usually recruited to via UCAS. UCAS publish a list of tariff points for a range of qualifications that enable equivalency to be assessed (e.g. grade A\* at A-level is worth 120 points with an A grade worth 100 and a B worth 80 and so on): <http://www.ucas.com/how-it-all-works/explore-your-options/entry-requirements/tariff-tables>



process and Ross (2010), writing about a South African university's approach, highlights the advantages of a biographical questionnaire focussed upon applicants' experiences of educational disadvantage and personal trauma and their learning from this in order to assess resourcefulness and tenacity alongside intellectual ability. In this sense it could be that academic potential (rather than certificated attainment) is not entirely separate to character.

### **What would an explicit focus upon character mean for recruitment and selection?**

Having explored some of the contemporary challenges within admissions debates and the current regulatory context, this article will now outline some of the implications that result from a re-focussing upon moral character. This section focuses upon the importance of exploring the motives of applicants and also discusses current and potential approaches to the assessment of 'good character', whilst the next section focuses upon curriculum and pedagogic issues.

It has been argued that a focus upon the motivation of applicants is critical and contributes to an assessment of character given that motives precede actions. Unresolved or excessive desires to 'help' can result in the undermining of personal responsibility and rights to self-determination (Furness, 2007). Research examining the motivation of applicants highlights a range of factors including a concern with social justice, a commitment to improving the life experiences of others and applicants' sense that their personal attributes make them well suited for this work (Furness, 2007; Moriarty and Murray, 2007; Moriarty *et al* 2011). Motivations require particular attention in respect of social work given that applicants may have had limited contact with the profession and so how they align their attributes with the requirements of professional life may be affected by the way in which social work is represented in advertisements and recruitment literature (Corvo, Selmi and Montemaro, 2003), as well as influenced by public discourse and media representation of the profession. Although many universities require that applicants have some experience of social care or other 'helping' roles, professional body requirements (TCSW, 2011) refer to the need for a basic awareness of the nature of social work rather than experience *per se*. Given the differences between many forms of social care and social work, the role played by personal experience, and also the fact that social work is not a universally experienced service, further research may be needed to more fully understand the impact of various factors upon motivation to enter professional training.

As previously mentioned, HCPC include the need for 'good character' in their fitness to practise and registration requirements. However, in the majority of cases assessment of 'good character' is, in fact, limited to identifying the absence of indicators of 'bad character' (Boak, Mitchell and Moore, 2012). The focus is upon the exploration of any disclosed criminal or disciplinary record, rather than positive indications of good character. A fair and equitable assessment of risk in such situations requires a contextualised approach to exploring the offence/s and the applicant's present 'character'. Indeed, as Banks (2010) and

Davis (1999) have highlighted, assessments of previous conduct frequently turn upon a consideration as to whether the act in question was 'out of character', rather than illustrative of the personal qualities of the person concerned. This is reflected in the statements by UK barring list case-workers when explaining that one serious incident is less likely to lead to barring than multiple less serious incidents, as the former is more easily seen as being out of character (Stevens *et al*, 2010).

Given that 'character' is generally only actively assessed in cases of suspected 'difficulty', Clark (2006) highlights the challenge of identifying appropriate tests of moral standing and the content of assessments of moral character at the admissions stage. However, might it be the case that the combined expertise of those involved in selection processes could be further harnessed to design and implement assessments that proactively identify and assess inner characteristics required for social work students? It may be that the increased participation of service users and carers in these processes is worthy of further research, particularly given that in one study service users and carers reported that they have a unique contribution to make to the assessment of personal suitability of applicants: a 'special insight' (Makta, River, Littlechild and Powell, 2010, p.10). Relevant considerations here may include preferred attributes and explicit reference to the kind of person suited to social work, as well as to the core ability and willingness to learn, openness to the views of others and responsiveness to feedback given the role of education and practice in developing virtue and character.

Although TCSW guidance appears to encourage a focus upon personal characteristics as part of a holistic assessment, it cautions that:

The assessment of these issues is both crucial and yet a very sensitive task. Without great care, skill and transparency, this can become a highly contested aspect of the selection process and lead to discriminatory practices. (TCSW, 2011, p.24)

Some may challenge the potentially subjective and changeable nature of the content of an approach to the selection of students for social work courses that foregrounds an assessment of their moral character. However, Clark (2006) argues that it is highly likely that selectors hold mental images of what makes for 'good' and 'bad' applicants that may affect judgment. Therefore transparency about the requirements of such assessments goes a significant way to ensure fairness. The Quality Assurance Authority's Code of Practice (2006) requires that recruitment policies must be clear and transparent. Entry requirements, including non-academic aspects such as the skills, *qualities* and aptitudes indicating potential to succeed on each programme used to underpin selection decisions must be made known to applicants. Although less is 'owed' to applicants compared to enrolled students in due process terms, it is of course critical that grounds for rejecting applicants can be articulated accurately and fairly. Whilst no right of appeal exists against academic judgement, lack of fairness or failure to follow due process may be subject to challenge.

A number of authors highlight an apparent reluctance on the part of academics to exercise their gate-keeping responsibilities, perhaps because of concerns about potential challenges and uncertainty about the robustness of such decisions given the challenges of defining such non-academic entry criteria (Dillon, 2007; Miller and Koerin, 1998). Perhaps ironically,

authors writing from the North American context have shown that legal challenges to selection decisions have failed where there is evidence that fair and published processes were followed and it is in fact the absence of such transparency that has caused significant difficulties (Tam and Coleman, 2011 p506).

Others explain this 'reluctance' by reference to the commitments to social justice previously mentioned or by reference to the clashing priorities that may arise when universities increasingly regard students as customers and an important source of income. However, as Curren (2009) recognises, a duty of care is owed to applicants (as well as to service users and carers) in respect of the cost of training if they are unlikely to be successful. In addition, it is important to remember that despite the significance of the social justice contribution made by the expansion of higher education, entry to the professions is not a 'right' (Dillon, 2007; Elpers and FitzGerald, 2012):

Entrants to social work education need to recognise that they do so under trust; therefore the responsibility also lies with them to demonstrate suitability at the selection stage, and to uphold the academic and professional standards of social work thereafter (Dillon, 2007, p.839).

Furthermore, it may be timely to re-conceptualise characteristics previously defined as 'non-academic' selection criteria as 'academic' criteria (Elpers and FitzGerald, 2012). Removing the traditional distinction between academic and non-academic criteria needed for entry has the advantage of bringing all such assessments within the procedurally safe 'academic judgement' zone, without precluding openness and transparency about what is being assessed, whilst further strengthening entry standards in line with recent Reform expectations.

### **Course and curriculum implications**

The final section of this article explores the curriculum *content* and *process* factors relevant to the development of the moral and virtuous character of students, rather than upon the growing body of literature concerned with the teaching of social work values (Bisman, 2004). The notion that social work educators should attend to the assessment of professional suitability as an on-going and iterative process is far from new (Gibbs and Blakely, 2000) but is an important reminder that suitability to practise is not a fixed state of affairs and can be 'impaired' temporarily, or more permanently, depending upon a range of factors. However, the implications of a renewed focus upon the personal qualities of students clearly extend beyond the expectations that there will be regular assessments and use of processes by which those deemed unsuitable or unready can be removed from qualifying courses. Indeed, taking moral character seriously requires that course providers design curricula through which the desired characteristics and qualities can be developed and refined, given that they are acquired through instruction and developed through habituation (McBeath and Webb, 2002).

Turning first to consider curriculum **content**, several authors have highlighted the fact that this has tended to privilege the content of relevant Code/s (Morelock, 1997; Webster, 2011; Duffy and Hayes, 2012). Whilst as students surely need to be alerted to the obligations and responsibilities inherent in the professional role, such a focus is arguably not sufficient. As Gray (2010) notes, virtue comes not from rule following, but from training and practice. Morelock's study (1997) showed how a focus upon didactic teaching of the National Association of Social Workers Codes (NASW) in North America resulted in some opportunities to extend the students' moral development being missed. Banks (2006) highlights the importance of embedding opportunities within the social work curriculum to explore different meanings of professional values such as honesty and truthfulness, and the importance of explicitly attending to this in the development of character and faculties of judgment within social work.

In addition to the curriculum content issues referred to above, authors have also highlighted the importance of **process** factors. Valutis, Rubin and Bell (2011) highlight the relative lack of attention within social work literature to the nature of socialisation into professional values. They observe that social work education 'imparts values and identity as well as knowledge to its students. It contributes in both intended and unintended ways to the socialization of students to the professional culture' (2011, p.2). Clearly the socialisation and development processes referred to are not only dependent upon teaching relevant content, but are dependent upon having an effective *process* curriculum in place. Elpers and FitzGerald, writing from the North American context, report that the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) requires that social work courses have a 'documented implicit curriculum alongside explicit curriculum that shapes the professional character and competence of the program's graduates and promotes an educational culture that is congruent with the values of the profession' (2012, p.2). TCSW (nd) have also produced a guide encouraging universities to pay attention to the process curriculum, although there currently appears to be less direct reference to character and moral development in this document than in the CSWE equivalent. However, the guide (TCSW, nd) has the *potential*, especially when considered alongside the required introduction of 'skills' days into social work courses in England (SWRB, 2010, p2), to strengthen the process elements of professional educational experiences. Banks (2006) reminds us of Statman's assertion that learning to be virtuous is like any other form of learning and is dependent upon observing competent others and so the importance of faculty, and arguably placement, role-modelling cannot be ignored. It might be argued that role-modelling within a university context includes demonstrating openness to responding to feedback and the importance of acknowledging mistakes and communicating 'recognition' and respect in dealings with others. These are potentially important components of any process curriculum.

Authors have also highlighted pedagogic approaches that attend to the development of the moral character of social work students. Lovat and Gray argue that: "All too often social work training courses focus only on the practice skills of listening and communication when

the real art inheres in deliberative skills which are often completely over-looked" (2008, p.1110). Banks (2010) also highlights the importance of providing opportunities for students to practice and develop skills in debate and dialogue. Indeed, the literature exploring the value of debates as pedagogic tools within social work education (Whiting, 2008; Gregory and Holloway, 2005) has identified not only the practice-relevant skills that can be refined through such an approach, but also the contribution they may make to the very 'being' of the student. Such pedagogic approaches help to reduce the separation between field and classroom learning and promote critical thinking and respect for alternative views. Importantly such approaches enable 'flaws' in personal qualities to be recognised and addressed (Davis 1999). Perhaps less frequently tested characteristics such as bravery and courage might benefit significantly from such approaches. The focus here is less upon the teaching of ethics, and more upon promoting moral development and learning. Such opportunities need to be located within a context in which all are committed to such personal learning and in which students are both supported and challenged when necessary. This requires a creative use of exploratory and supportive activities alongside a willingness to utilise formal processes to pause or end a student's training when needed.

Both elements of such an approach require time and commitment and yet are critical to the development of the wise and reflective practitioner needed in contemporary social work. Indeed, as Higgs (2012) acknowledges, careful attention must be paid to the need for students to have time and space to consider, understand and work through their views, positions, identities and responses before being able to share these. Only then can students meaningfully work on the development of judgement and wisdom. Higgs (2012) notes that for many students in her study, seminar discussions had not provided the degree of reflective space or time required. The online a-synchronous discussions that replaced seminars in the module under review were shown to allow students to work collaboratively, and with flexibility over time, and also provided a degree of privacy deemed necessary for such personal explorations.

The importance of early exposure to the critical role of reflection has been explored elsewhere within professional literature (Taylor, 1997; Schön, 1983). The relevance of critical reflection for the present discussion lies in its role in the development of wise and sound judgment. Although a fuller discussion of the process by which judgement develops is beyond the scope of this article, literature examining the role of practical reasoning in curriculum design (Reid, 1979) and literature examining judgments in workplace learning (Beckett and Hager, 2010) is of interest here. In addition, the role of critical reflection in challenging assumptions and initial responses is fundamental to personal and professional development in social work. This is particularly so given the growing recognition of the need for social work students to learn to manage uncertainty, ambiguity and 'not-knowing'. In contexts in which rules do not provide certainty or do not apply, the existence of a well-developed internal 'moral compass' becomes even more important. Houston (2012, p.667) suggests that 'A commitment to humility and a reverence for complexity and contradiction is the mind-set that enables the ethical enquirer to make a tentative leap into the horizons of the other' and so an appreciation of, and comfort with, the role of uncertainty in social work is essential for developing the virtuous practitioner. Similarly, Cornish (2011, p135) considers the relevance of Keat's notion of 'negative capability'; the ability to respond

constructively to uncertainty and to 'not know', within a context in which competence is often equated with knowledge and action, rather than 'being'. Cornish highlights the need for students to learn to 'inhabit and use uncertainty as a reflective and ethically bound space within which they can flourish, rather than it being a draining source of anxiety' in order to avoid being paralysed by fear of not knowing (2011, p.136). The importance of designing reflective spaces into the curriculum and encouraging students to learn to hold back from premature judgment in observational and other learning is highlighted and echoes the need that Talbot identified for such spaces within medical education when asking: 'Have we made space for emotion, reflection and attitudinal development?' (2004, p. 592)

Thompson and West are persuasive in their argument that 'the significance of practice wisdom has been underplayed in pre-service education and training' (2012, p2). They acknowledge debates about the extent to which wisdom can be taught or must be learned through life experiences over a lengthy period, as per the early position taken by Aristotle who had argued that the wise application of theory to the real world requires knowledge of the 'particulars' that comes from experience rather than teaching. However, they suggest that this does not absolve social work educators of their responsibilities to guide the development of wisdom through the explicit use of appropriate learning strategies such as problem based learning and case studies or a 'rich variety of simulated organizational experiences which help them develop a sense of self-efficacy that can survive sufficiently across contexts' (Thompson and West, 2012, p.13).

Acknowledging concerns about competency-based models of education, Bogo *et al* (2006) explored with practice supervisors the qualities and characteristics deemed important for professional practice. Importantly these were drawn from experiences of working with 'strong' students as well as those who had been deemed problematic. The authors argue that:

Qualities of professionalism such as judgment and reflection, necessary when working with complex and uncertain value-laden situations, are not captured well in such an approach (Bogo *et al*, 2006; p.580).

Bogo *et al* (2006) acknowledge that such matters are often implicit in criteria used to assess students. They found that supervisors were more likely to 'forgive' perceived deficits in knowledge and skills than in personal qualities and characteristics (Bogo *et al*, 2006, p.587).. The introduction of the PCF in England was intended to promote a more holistic approach to assessment and to avoid pitfalls associated with a more atomistic assessment of discrete competencies. It is currently too early to evaluate the effectiveness of this change, but the lack of direct reference to character in the PCF may limit the extent to which transparent and robust assessments of character are possible unless more explicit attention is paid to this through the development of clear process curricula.

## Conclusion

This article has argued for a re-focusing upon moral character as a necessary, although not sufficient, component of assessments of prospective and enrolled social work students. The article has explored the reform-led focus upon academic excellence within England and has outlined the tensions inherent within the gate-keeping role of social work educators. However, it has also argued that these are not as polarised as has previously been implied and that an explicit focus upon the character of entrants to the profession necessitates an acknowledgment of intellectual ability and also enables a procedurally fair and explicit practice to develop. TCSW guidance (2011) recognises that all involved in the selection of prospective social work students should practise the values of the profession within the process, highlighting once more the importance of role-modelling desirable traits. As a result of the fallible nature of the selection processes and the fluid nature of suitability, there is a need to join up pre-university admissions, course experience, and preparation for employment processes. However, this article has also identified some of the challenges that a more explicit focus upon character may bring. These include determining exactly what is required prior to commencing professional training, given the recognition that virtues may, with the 'right' set of circumstances, be developed through education and practice rather than necessarily being innate.

Important and exciting opportunities exist, particularly given the significant stakeholder involvement in social work education, to create learning environments conducive to the development, flourishing and assessment of virtue in those admitted to social work courses. As shown by Higgs (2012), such a focus upon the essential 'being' of students requires the allocation of time and space for active and critical reflection and the implications for staff should not be underestimated. The introduction in England of the career-spanning PCF within social work and social work education may have much to offer in promoting a more continuous and holistic assessment of capabilities across a number of domains. However, care will be needed to ensure that it does not end up being used in a reductionist way, with the effect that a focus upon the character of the individual is lost despite the espoused commitment to holistic assessments. This article has demonstrated, through a focus upon both selection and pedagogy, that explicit attention to character and moral development within professional education plays a significant role in supporting the development of effective and virtuous practitioners who are able to exercise sound judgement and wisdom within social work.

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