Critically Reflecting on Critical Self-Reflection:

An examination of students’ experiences and professional development in a human service practicum course

By

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ABSTRACT

CRITICALLY REFLECTING ON CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTION: AN EXAMINATION OF STUDENT EXPERIENCES AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN A HUMAN SERVICE PRACTICUM COURSE.

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This thesis is an investigation of student experiences with the process of critical self-reflection and professional identity development in practicum. The process of critical self-reflection that is the focus for this study is based on Mezirow’s concepts of critical self-reflection, critical theories of education, and narrative concepts of identity development. Nine undergraduate students provided critical self-reflection assignments that they had written for their third year practicum course, and participated in follow-up interviews. Seven were enrolled in the youth-stream and two in the adult stream of an interdisciplinary social science program. A thematic analysis of the data was conducted. Participants reported that transformative learning occurred through relational experiences such as stories and conversations, as well as relationships built in practicum. Relationships and role modelling also led to professional identity development. This study suggests the potential value of future research exploring critical self-reflection and transformative learning using narrative methods.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Professionals working in the human service sector interact with individuals from diverse backgrounds and with varying experiences. It is often the role of these professionals to identify individual needs, provide or develop individual, group or community-level interventions, and review their approaches over time. Human service professionals also deal with issues of power and privilege with service recipients every day—poverty, differences in ability, gender, learning style, and differences in sexual orientation can all be relevant factors in an individual’s experience. As well, in some cases, the way professionals understand and respond to these differences can affect an individual’s experience and ultimately their success in various systems (hooks, 2010). For example, within the education system, approaches to teaching and classroom management can be partially tied to a teacher’s own personal history and positionality (age, gender, race, experience of school etc.) as well as their understanding of this position. When these factors don’t match those of their students, and when teachers are not aware of the role of difference in learning, this can result in less effective teaching for those students (Kyles & Olafson, 2008).

Helping professionals need to be able to work effectively in responding to diverse needs (He & Cooper, 2009). In some helping professions, responding to individual needs means recognizing how one’s own identities and positionalities impact one’s professional interactions and understandings of recipients’ life choices and access to resources. In some cases this awareness is thought to increase through the process of self-reflection or critical self-reflection (Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1990).

Critical self-reflection can be broadly described as a way of reflecting on one’s own and others’ perspectives, positions, and/or assumptions in order to better understand how the social
locations of provider and recipient influence the interaction. This process is meant to improve perspective-taking and understanding for future practice interventions. This process can also involve taking action to solve identified problems, or altering views in order to address the problem differently in the future. The process of critical self-reflection has gained interest in social service sectors in recent decades across different disciplines (White, Fook, & Gardner, 2006). It is often used as a learning tool in pre-service programs for teaching, social work, nursing and medicine.

Critical self-reflection is intended to help the pre-human service professional develop awareness of his or her roles, identities and relationships in a practice situation within the professional context (White, et al., 2006). When engaging in planning or making ethical decisions, a professional needs to be aware of his or her own social location, experiences, and biases, how they might be affecting their decision-making and the ways in which they relate to others. This is a process that may begin during educational experiences or professional training, especially through practicum or co-op experiences. It is also intended that the practice continues through a professional’s career. Through critical self-reflection, professionals can work continuously to uncover their beliefs and deconstruct/reconstruct beliefs and understandings which can lead to more sensitive teaching strategies and informed interventions (Kyles & Olafson, 2008).

The theoretical reasoning for engaging in critical self-reflection has been widely discussed (Agyris & Schon, 1974; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Hatcher et al., 2010; hooks, 2010; McDonough, 2009; Mezirow, 1990). It is understood that the use of critical self-reflection can lead to the development of critical consciousness which is a greater awareness of oneself and one’s positioning in terms of power, privilege, and oppression, and one’s conceptions of identity
and difference (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; McDonough, 2009). Critical self-reflection supports critical consciousness, in that it helps the student explore experiences in practicum in relation to their personal position, ideally resulting in more informed interventions with diverse individuals and systems. While the theoretical basis for this process has been widely discussed, very rarely have student experiences of critical self-reflection been examined. This study addressed this gap by examining student experiences with critical self-reflection in an interdisciplinary social science program. As well it examined critical self-reflection in relation to the development of critical consciousness and professional development.

**Relevance to the program**

This study was an examination of student experiences in a third year practicum course in an interdisciplinary social science program. As such, it may provide insight into the development of practicum courses in the program in focus, as well as other similar programs, in that it will provide insight into students’ experiences and learning in these courses and the contribution of these courses to the overall learning goals of similar programs. Understanding students’ experiences with this course should contribute to an understanding of how it is meeting their needs, what they are learning from the process of critical self-reflection, and how this course may relate to professional identity development.

Examining students’ experiences in an interdisciplinary human service practicum is also important to the human service fields in which graduates from these programs will be working. It is important to understand what professional training students gain from the course in order to determine what placements, experiences and responsibilities may be most helpful and supportive for them. Overall, there are clear expectations for what students should be gaining from these
practicum settings, but what is not clear is how students engage with these expectations, or what students have learned about these topics once they have completed the course. It is important to know what students feel they are gaining from their applied experiences in practicum, and how it is contributing to their overall professional identity development.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to examine student’s experiences in an interdisciplinary social science program with regards to students’ experiences of critical self-reflection, and linking theory and practice. This study will provide an exploration of how critical self-reflection may be tied to the development of critical consciousness and one’s professional identity within the context of an undergraduate practicum course.

**Research Questions**

1. What themes emerge when students engage in reflective practice during a practicum placement with the individuals and systems they work within? What issues arise within various settings, roles and supervisors?
2. What do students report learning about critical consciousness in practicum? What aspects of practicum do students feel contribute to the development of critical consciousness? Does this influence their overall professional identity?
3. How do students conceptualize critical self-reflection after taking the course? Do they report applying new knowledge to work with individuals or groups after practicum?

**Personal Position**
It would not be appropriate to propose a study about critical self-reflection without identifying my own position and the reason I chose to undertake this project. I was first introduced to this type of learning in my Bachelor of Social Work program at the University of Waterloo. I was asked to write field notes journals and “critical self-reflection papers” regarding my experiences in my placement and with the material I was learning in classes. Engaging in this type of reflection changed the way I understood myself and the world around me as I began to see the underlying reasons for my decision-making and factors affecting the decisions of those around me. I realized that there were probably a number of reasons why I chose the field of social work including family encounters with unexpected death, mental illness, learning disabilities and more. What these experiences had in common is they made me feel different or abnormal, and prompted me to reflect on the different experiences that people have in various life stages based on their subjective position and life experience. I began to believe that there was often more to an individual’s story than I might be able to know and understand, and I began applying this belief to the way I approached my practice.

More specifically, these reflections changed the way I thought about the students I was working with in the “Section 23” expulsion program. A section 23 program is an alternative or treatment education program for students whose needs are not met in mainstream school such as a special classroom in a drug treatment facility. The program I was involved with through my B.S.W. practicum was an expulsion program for youth, which had the ultimate goal of helping youth address their struggles and return to mainstream school. I began to see how their positionalities affected their educational experience. I began to realize the ways in which the educational system and other social service systems had not met their needs, and the numerous ways that they had tried to get those needs met before ending up in situations of violence or
substance misuse. I believe that my skill in critical self-reflection has helped me in my work with youth as I understand some of the underlying structural reasons for individual positions. Even when I do not understand or cannot relate to the specific issue a client is experiencing, I have the awareness that there may be more to the situation that I can readily see or understand, and so I am prompted to explore and deconstruct various aspects of the issue rather than blaming the individual.

Conversely, many of my peers, in my B.S.W. program, who were also being asked to engage in this reflective exercise reported finding these exercises to be tedious and pointless. They did not see the value in the exercise and could not identify how it might have affected the way they thought about themselves or their work. Many of them made statements claiming to already know themselves, or alternatively felt that who they are has no place in their service delivery. I found these conclusions to be confusing and alarming, but it also began to highlight for me the different ways in which people may choose to approach human service work. Some may choose a critical path, while others may take a more objectivist approach to working with others. I felt that this difference in perspective had a great deal to do with personal values and philosophies (which are rooted in individual experiences), and began to wonder about how personal philosophy and perspective-taking affects approaches to practice.

One year later I found myself in a graduate program with an interdisciplinary developmental social science focus. I was now teaching and grading critical self-reflections as the teaching assistant for the third and fourth-year practicum courses in the corresponding undergraduate program. I was very passionate about promoting these exercises for students entering the field for the first time, but I found some of the same results as I did my own program. Some students really embraced the experience and the process of critical self-
reflection, while others openly criticised the reflections or did not appear to take them seriously. Furthermore, I felt that some students did not grasp the concept even though they were trying to engage in the task of self-reflection. The process for these students may have included, for example, writing a paper affirming their own beliefs and approaches and trying to persuade the reader of how their experiences have contributed to their successes in practicum, rather than a critical deconstruction or an idea, belief or situation. For example, a student might explain why his or her approach to supporting teen moms is the best approach, rather than discussing the benefits and limitations of the approach, or demonstrating and understanding of different perspectives.

I became fascinated with this process and the differences in experiences that individuals had within the course and in writing critical self-reflections. Through more reflective thought I began to realize that it was my political and social orientation that made me feel that this process of critical self-reflection was so important. I work with youth from a critical, anti-oppressive perspective, which involves identifying and considering one’s biases and position of power. I began to wonder, whether this process was really necessary for individuals in developing a critical consciousness, or whether it may just be one that is effective for me. I wondered what meaning critical self-reflection truly has for other students, and what they may get out of participating in practicum and critical reflection in terms of their professional development. I decided that these were necessary questions I wanted to explore.

**Context of Study**

At the time of the study, participants were students enrolled at a medium-sized university, which is located in a medium-sized city in Ontario. The practicum course that is the focus for
this study is a required course for third year students in an interdisciplinary social science program. Courses and faculty in the program reflect multiple academic disciplines, including biology, psychology, social work, social policy, nutrition, and family and gender studies. Courses often examine experiences of children, youth, adults and their families from a developmental perspective, integrating knowledge and perspectives from various disciplines.

**Overview of the course.** The practicum course from which participants were recruited includes students who focus on youth (and their families) and those who focus on adults (and their families). For the practicum courses, students in the youth-focused stream and the adult-focused stream are taught together in one course, which consists of a number of different components. First, a student is matched with a placement in the community where they are able to work with a specific population such as youth or adults for 12 hours per week for 12 weeks (144 hours total). What is expected of students in these settings is highly dependent on the specific setting and supervisor. For example, if a student is placed in a school, they may work one-on-one with children with learning disabilities and may be supervised by a teacher, if they are in a retirement home they may be asked to deliver recreational programming to older adults and may be supervised by a program coordinator.

**Expected Outcomes.** “Key Attributes of a [program] Graduate”, is a curriculum guiding document that was developed by the faculty of the program. It outlines the qualities one should possess when graduating from the program. One category of skills that is reflected is the intrapersonal category. This category states that a graduate of this program should possess skills in “critical thinking/self-reflection” and “ethical decision-making”. Another category is the practice/research category, and this reflects the importance of developing an understanding of professional issues and ethics.
In the course outline for the youth-stream version of the courses in focus, which can be viewed in Appendix A there is a list of learning objectives for the course. These explain what a student is expected to gain from the course or demonstrate by the end of the practicum experience in a school setting. There are a variety of outcomes listed, which reflect the various practical and theoretical aspects of the course. A number of these simply reflect performing duties as expected of students within the school setting (e.g. working with youth). A few, however, go beyond program delivery and focus on the understandings that students should develop from the course. For example, “Outcome 2” states that students must: “Demonstrate an understanding of the role of the school in the lives of children and youth”. This outcome expects that a student will not simply participate in daily activities, but will rather reflect on their role in service delivery and the role of the larger system in the lives of children and youth.

“Outcome 7” asks that students: “Demonstrate skills in reflective practice focusing on the relationship between theoretical and applied knowledge and on personal interactions and self-knowledge”. This outcome is all about self-reflection and connecting previous and current theoretical learning with practice. It also addresses the importance of students in the course developing a deeper awareness of the self and the student’s role in their practicum setting. Ultimately the goal is a movement towards critical consciousness or a greater awareness of the self in relation to other individuals, systems and situations. This study examined from the student’s perspective what the process of critical self-reflection was for students, what types of changes in perspectives or critical consciousness might occur for students, and the process through which this might happen in the courses in focus.

Class Assignments. In order to learn from the experiences of others in the class and to begin to discuss practicum experiences, students participate in weekly one-hour small-group
seminars either in person or online. In this course component, students are expected to report on their experiences, contribute meaningfully to group discussion, and support others in problem-solving. Students are also asked to take daily field notes during their practicum placement in order to record their feelings, reactions and experiences. Students are essentially asked to “conduct research on themselves” by recording and later analyzing their field notes. These field notes are not intended to be viewed by others and students are free to record their experiences in whatever form they choose (e.g. point form, narrative, etc.). These field notes serve as the basic “data” that students will use to reflect on their experiences in their critical self-reflections, which are submitted for a grade.

The students are then expected to write critical self-reflections throughout the course that review and deconstruct the experiences and reflections that they have recorded in their field notes. Students are instructed to reference and cite their field notes in these reflections. There is some variation in this process because there are multiple sections of this course and course instructors vary in their particular emphases. In all sections students are expected to write about experiences in their applied settings and report on their experiences with themselves as the “research subject”. However, the specific instructions that students are given for the reflective process have varied slightly across sections. For example, in one section the course outline described the “steps” of self-reflection to be: reflecting on data that is collected within the field (field notes) to look for patterns or key themes, identifying an incident or an issue that has come up in practicum, examining “dissonance” or the different perspectives with regards to this issue, and articulating learning (J. Pepper, personal communication, March 7, 2013). Another professor used similar outline, but the model that she used had six steps. This model was more prescriptive in that it demanded that the writer follow a very specific problem-solving process.
Theoretical Basis

**Critical self-reflection.** Critical self-reflection is a term and a practice used in a number of helping professions (including teaching, social work, counselling, nursing, and medicine) to describe the process or act of reflecting on one’s responses (emotional and intellectual) and actions in a practice context. Smyth (1989) describes these approaches as “broadly a reflective approach to teacher education” (p. 2). Critical self-reflection is one of many terms that are used when examining the relationship between professional development and self-reflection across different fields. Some of the different terms used to describe similar processes include critical self-reflection, critical thinking, and reflexivity (White, et al., 2006), reflection-based inquiry (Fox, White & Kidd, 2011) and reflective teaching (Calderhead, 1989). These terms are used somewhat interchangeably or often described as related within the literature, or they may represent a similar process within different fields of practice, for example reflexivity is a term more frequently used within the social work literature, whereas the education literature may use terms such as reflective teaching. The term critical consciousness (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; McDonough, 2009) is used in the literature to denote the desired result of engaging in the process of critical self-reflection. The two key terms that were used for the purpose of this study are critical consciousness and critical self-reflection.

**Critical self-reflection across disciplines.** Within education, nursing, social work and related fields, critical self-reflection has been developed and studied in the context of training students and is used as a learning tool for students in applied placements. The scholarship on critical reflection frequently addresses issues of approach such as the theoretical foundation of reflective practice. There is also a great deal of literature from various disciplines, which examines or compares various approaches to critical self-reflection. The literature also explores
how the process can used to tackle important social issues such as cultural diversity in the classroom (White et al., 2006). This approach to learning and practice has been informed by a number of theories and movements.

Critical self-reflection emerged with the introduction of consciousness-raising during the 1970’s movements such as women’s liberation and the black power movement (Swan, 2008). The idea that women could and should understand their subjective experiences as having political roots and further, that experience could provide critically important data for building new theory began appearing in radical feminist writings of the late 1960s. In 1970, Carol Hanisch published an influential article that first framed “The Personal as Political”. From here “looking inward” and examining oneself as a way of understanding assumptions and subjective experiences gained traction in the social services and formed the basis of the method as it has since developed (Swan, 2008). In contemporary critical literature, writers such as bell hooks have worked to promote critical thinking and critical reflecting in teaching and learning within higher education (hooks, 2010). In Teaching Critical Thinking (hooks, 2010), the author writes about encouraging students to engage in critical reflection as a means to liberate oppressed individuals and address power imbalances, and outlines a number of ways that this can be done such as through the use of storytelling.

In the education literature, critical self-reflection has been promoted as a means of educating pre-service teachers to engage in critical thinking and develop self-awareness and more effective approaches to teaching individuals with diverse experiences and backgrounds. In contrast, the focus of critical self-reflection in critical theory is oriented to the task of using personal reflection to raise awareness and ultimately, to change inequitable political systems (Swan, 2008). As critical pedagogue Paulo Freire (1970) argues, the risk in not engaging in
reflective practices is that we become “sub-oppressors”, who in order to gain power and privilege, continue the cycle of oppression (Freire, 1970).

In the social work literature, critical self-reflection is rooted in notions of “experiential learning theory” (Kolb, 1984). In Kolb’s view, “learning is a process whereby knowledge is created through transformation of experience” (p. 38). The importance of critical self-reflection in social work is also highlighted for reasons similar to those in the critical feminist and psychology literature: to address one’s assumptions and the power dynamics at play within the context of the client-worker relationship (Lam, Wong & Leung, 2007). The understanding of power imbalances and assumptions that can be gleaned from critical self-reflection is essential to both structural and critical social work (Heron, 2005). Critical self-reflection is also understood as providing a space for human service professionals to increase accountability and promote change within individuals and systems (Fook, 1999). Ultimately, the goal of critical self-reflection in social work is to engage the social work trainee in the practice of “critical social work” or work that serves to promote equality and address issues of oppression and injustice (Fook, 1999).

Due to the incorporation of critical theories within education and social work, critical self-reflection has gained momentum in the teaching and social work literature, as well as that of a number of other professions. The modern literature on critical reflection began with Agyris and Schon (1974), who wrote about knowledge translation in the education field and the importance of critical reflection in navigating a constantly changing society. In their work, they identified that theories are implicit in the actions we take within educational practice. In other words, teachers make ethical decisions based on underlying assumptions about the world and these affect how they interpret and act within any given situation. Jack Mezirow added to this the
importance of identifying where this experiential knowledge comes from and questioning the existing theories that underpin it (O’Hara, Weber & Levine, 2006). These concepts were applied to the education and adult education literature by scholars like Mezirow, who identified practices such as “critical reflection of assumptions”. Mezirow (1998) indicates that broadly “critical” self-reflection involves making a judgement about the material that is being reflected upon.

Critical self-reflection has been identified as an important part of professional development within the education field. Prior research on critical self-reflection has shown that it can help students uncover beliefs and reconstruct the way they think about practice situations (Kyles & Olafson, 2008). Some researchers add that critical self-reflection as an integral part of critical thinking (Hager & Kaye, 1992; Hatcher et al., 2010). It is now considered to be an important part of professional education in a number of helping professions, and it is emphasized by having professionals in engage in reflective writing and field placements.

It is clear that a number of theorists and literatures use critical reflection as a method for promoting individual and social change. Fook (2002), for example, suggests that the process of deconstructing a social issue is an act of resistance (O’Hara, Weber, & Levine, 2006), but not all scholars agree. According to Swan (2008) some critics of critical self-reflection state that it is an example of the concept of critical reflection turned “confessional”. In these instances, self-reflection is viewed as a process that propels individuals to focus too much on themselves and become preoccupied about their own role in a problem rather than viewing problems as having social and political roots. Some critics believe that this can result in individualizing and depoliticizing a problem rather than examining systematic issues that need to be addressed (Swan, 2008, p. 385).
Mezirow and transformative learning. Mezirow’s work centres on the concept of “Transformative Learning”, which forms the basis of the critical reflection assignments that are being done in the courses in focus. This work originated in the education literature and drew on adult learning literature, especially works such as Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 1970). Mezirow uses Freire’s concepts around reflecting and acting to create social change and relates these to learning and professional development. He also draws from psychological learning theories such as Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, that explain how new understandings are created when people are presented with information that does not fit their current understandings (Ahteenmaki-Pelkonen, 2002). It is clear from this definition that Mezirow’s conception of transformative learning includes both attention to cognitive processes involved in understanding phenomena (similar to the developmental theory literature) and to meaning-making for the purpose of social action and change (such as in the critical literature). In this way the concept of transformative learning brings together ideas from both the educational and the critical literature.

Mezirow defines transformative learning as: “learning that transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change” (2003, p. 58). In his work, he discusses transformative learning as a shift in perspective. These shifts in perspective occur due to events or situations called “Disorienting Dilemmas” (1990) that prompt an individual to shift some element of their perspective in order to accommodate this new experience. An example of a disorienting dilemma could be a teacher punishing a child for acting out aggressively towards other students and then discovering that there is severe physical abuse going on at home. The teacher may have to shift their assumptions
in order to make sense of the child’s behaviour. Disorienting dilemmas can also be incredibly small or subtle, such as simply reflecting on a word that a teacher may have used to describe a child—for example describing a child as “attention-seeking” where another perspective may be that they are reaching out for support.

**Critical consciousness and critical self-reflection.** Critical consciousness can be described as the ultimate goal in the process of critical self-reflection—an ideal state of being where one is completely aware of oneself, one’s positioning in terms of power, privilege, and oppression, and one’s conceptions of identity and difference (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; McDonough, 2009). This can be thought of not as something that can actually be achieved, but rather as an ideal to work towards. Critical self-reflection can be viewed as the iterative process (Gleaves, Walker, & Grey, 2008) by which one attempts to develop critical consciousness through an on-going commitment to professional self-examination. Within the practice context, this means that the individual repeatedly engages in critical self-reflection in the attempt to make meaning of their professional experiences as these relate to who they are as a person overall. The professional then takes the reflection back to the action context and gains new experiences, which are then reflected upon.

**Studies examining the application of critical self-reflection and critical consciousness in professional settings.** A number of studies have been conducted that attempt to examine the value of critical self-reflection, and various ways of integrating it into professional education for the purpose of developing critical consciousness. Many scholars advocate for the importance of critical self-reflection in teaching (Tucker, Stronge, Gareis, & Beers, 2003) and other helping professions, however there is little consensus on how to develop critical consciousness or engage students in transformative learning (Taylor, 1998).
A debate in teacher education literature on the subject of diversity has been determining the best process for developing critical consciousness using reflection and field experiences, or in combining the two (He & Cooper, 2009). In teacher education, critical consciousness can be developed in a number of ways. Some studies suggest the use of techniques within teaching and discuss strategies such as modelling critical self-reflection, or stopping during a lecture and reflecting on the current process of the situation (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Other studies, including that conducted by Gleaves and colleagues (2008), describe and compare journaling critical self-reflection, on paper and online (both of which are used in the courses in focus). They found that paper journaling was more effective in terms of how much was written but that the online digital writing was more consistently completed.

Gleaves and colleagues (2008) also discuss the ways in which using narratives to reflect on an experience brings about deep thought and questions about practice. Ultimately, this study found that different types of formats (brief ongoing digital diaries and written critical reflections) are needed to bring about different types of reflection. Brief ongoing reflections help the writer reflect on immediate reactions in action, whereas the written reflections add the ability to reflect on thoughts. Critical self-reflection is done in a number of ways. It can be done informally in one’s mind throughout the day, or it can be a written narrative form of expression. The critical self-reflection that occurs in the courses in focus is done through both field notes taken informally at the practicum, and formal written critical self-reflections where students are asked to deconstruct an issue. This process is consistent with other studies that looked at reflections in teacher education programs (Tucker et al., 2003).

A few studies focusing on journaling as self-reflection in higher education indicate that diaries (or reflective journals) are an effective format for students to reflect on their roles in
professional contexts (Gleaves et al., 2008; Hubbs & Brand, 2005; MacLeod & Cowieson, 2001). This is important as it allows professionals in the education system and other human service fields to reflect on their role of power and privilege and to improve approaches to working with people with diverse needs. In this way, a number of studies have also argued that critical self-reflection and teacher evaluation can improve outcomes for students (Tucker et al., 2003). More specifically, many argue that self-reflection and critical consciousness are essential for improving the outcomes for diverse students in the classroom (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; He & Cooper, 2009; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011). Overall, it is clear that a great deal of evidence exists for the importance of critical self-reflection in making professionals more aware of their professional role and personal position, as well as aiding them in ethical decision-making (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Smyth, 1989; Tucker et al., 2003).

There is also some debate in the literature about the preferred process of engaging in written critical self-reflection. While there is evidence that writing critical reflections contributes positively to professional learning (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2010), the process for critical self-reflection (for example, the steps that should be taken) is debated. One issue is that reflection is not always being used effectively. Sometimes it is being used as a way to look for easy solutions to professional problems. In these cases the individual may not be experiencing professional growth, but may be stagnating in their views (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2010; Schon, 1987).

Another way that the development of critical consciousness has been studied is through the acquisition of “cultural competence” (He & Cooper, 2009; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011). He and Cooper (2009) examined the development of cultural competence through a combination of reflective writing and field experience. They concluded that an ability to recognise the culture of their students, and an ability to address one’s own biases and racism were central aspects of
cultural competence. The process of acquiring cultural competence is therefore very similar to that of developing a critical consciousness, only the former focuses primarily on race and culture rather than accounting for other positionalities and differences in experiences between teachers and students.

I found only one social work study that used critical self-reflections as data for thematic analysis (Lam, Wong & Leung, 2007). The themes that emerged in this study include the emotions that prompt critical self-reflection in practicum students as well as student questions concerning the origins and locations of knowledge and power.

**Critical self-reflection and knowledge.** In critical self-reflection, knowledge is understood from a constructivist perspective, in that it is based on accumulated assumptions about a person, situation or issue. These assumptions can be confirmed, challenged and/or revised over time to create new knowledge. A specific type of knowledge identified in the literature in relation to professional development is “negative knowledge”. Negative knowledge is knowledge about a perceived error or negative experience in regards to a situation or task. Conversely, positive knowledge refers to knowledge about what one should do based on a positive action or experience in the field. Errors within human service work can be considered subjective in that different professionals will develop different values resulting in varied formulations of “right” and “wrong” approaches in the field. In the case of practicum, individuals may develop knowledge through observation of those around them, or through their own actions. This can help an individual in developing professional approaches and problem-solving skills in that it may help guide them towards the “right decision” by avoiding methods that were previously tried but did not achieve the desired outcome (Gartmeier, Bauer, Gruber, & Heid, 2008).
The terms “negative” and “positive” knowledge imply a sense of right and wrong. Although Gartmeier and colleagues (2008) explain that this is not what is meant by the writer, I feel that this concept it too simplistic to apply to the process of critical self-reflection in human service work. Instead for the purpose of this study I will explain negative knowledge as the process of understanding one’s “discomfort” with a particular situation, issue or value. Using the word discomfort implies that the evaluation of a particular value or approach is a subjective process rather than one which has a right or wrong answer.

Critical self-reflection can be seen as a way of exploring discomfort in order to better understand possible approaches and outcomes in a complex professional environment, in other words “learning from one’s own or others’ mistakes and successes”. The concept of understanding discomfort helps lend legitimacy to the process of critical reflection because critical self-reflection promotes reflection on experiences and allows for experiences to be translated into a deeper understanding of professional issues in relation to one’s own values.

**Professional learning and development in practicum settings.** As described above, students in the practicum courses in focus are generally enrolled in their third year of undergraduate study and many students are in the process of exploring potential career paths. The undergraduate experience can be viewed as the beginning of an ongoing journey in terms of professional learning and development (Webster-Wright, 2009). Many of the students in the practicum courses have generally had few professional experiences, and some are in the process of determining the next steps in their professional development. For some this will include research-based graduate study, others will seek employment in the human service field, and others will pursue further studies toward professional certification in careers such as social work,
teaching, speech and language pathology, and nursing. The third-year practicum course is intended to be a foundational experience in students’ subsequent career development.

According to career theory, an entire career can be understood as a socialization process (Webster-Wright, 2009). According to Webster-Wright (2009), professional learning (PL) within the field of education must be “continuing, active, social, and related to practice” (p. 703). Student experiences in practicum can be understood as part of the first stage in the process of professional learning and development. The professional development that may occur in practicum could happen in a number of ways, including exposure to the philosophies and practices of the setting, as well as the individuals who work there (including but not limited to their supervisor) as potential role models.

**Gaps in the literature.** The theory of transformative learning and critical reflection have been widely discussed across different fields, but the practice of these (or how they might be instituted in the classroom) have not been very commonly investigated (Taylor, 1998). Researchers have found mixed results in terms of the development of critical self-reflection and professional development after applied experiences (Tucker et al., 2003). For example, Gleaves and colleagues (2008) found that compliance with journaling and critical self-reflection was not correlated with the depth or quality of critical reflections. As described above there are numerous formats in which people might engage in critical self-reflection and numerous ways of measuring depth or quality; therefore there is little consensus in the literature about how this practice should be done or what makes it successful.

While the current study did not directly compare different approaches to reflective practice, follow-up interviews provided participants with an opportunity to reflect on which
aspects of the course may have contributed to their thinking and learning. Webster-Wright (2009) suggests that it is not a comparison in types of reflection that needs to occur in research, but rather an examination of the experience of learning for those engaging in professional development activities. It is evident that there may be a gap in the literature in terms of actually examining how learning happens for students in practicum settings, with a focus being placed more heavily on the comparison of different existing methods (Webster-Wright, 2009).

Another gap in the literature is that many of the studies specifically address experiences in developing critical consciousness around culture or cultural competence (Gleaves et al., 2008; He & Cooper, 2009; Kyles & Olafson, 2008;; Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011) but do not address critical consciousness with regards to other differences in power and privilege in social systems such as class, gender, learning style, ability, sexual orientation or any number of other positionalities and experiences. This study provided an opportunity for students to report on what they learned about the individuals and systems they worked within, and they ways in which this learning may have happened for them.

Prior research has not focused on the meaning of critical self-reflection for students in interdisciplinary social science programs, in terms of how students experience this process. It also has not frequently examined what they may gain from the process in terms of their professional identity development. I could not locate any studies that integrated concepts of positive and negative knowledge or other professional development concepts in a practicum setting with the process of critical self-reflection. Overall the context in which critical self-reflection took place was rarely a focus in previous studies.
Most literature on critical reflection and professional development through professional education comes from the field of teacher education (Webster-Wright, 2009). The interdisciplinary programs in focus provide a unique group of participants, as students in this program are not coming from a specific training perspective like teaching or social work. These participants are learning about human service work from a number of disciplinary perspectives (biology, psychology, sociology etc.), and, as such, this study provides unique insight into the perspectives of these particular students. Furthermore, these students are undergraduates, and so they might be less experienced and developed in their career than those who have already begun a professional program, thus they might be at an earlier point in their professional identity development. As a result, the process of critical self-reflection may have a different purpose for undergraduate students, and may produce different results than reflections that are done in the context of only one chosen profession.

This study focused on the process of critical self-reflection for individuals in varied human service settings outside of the context of one profession. It focused on how participants experience the process of critical self-reflection. Rather than attempting to quantify the experience or focus on “level of critical reflection”, this study examined different experiences with the practice in order to provide insight into how students identify the process and what they feel they learn from it. It also examined students’ perspectives on what aspects of practicum they feel contribute to the development of critical consciousness, and what is learned from practicum in terms of professional identity development. In these ways, this study attempted to address some of the existing gaps in the literature on critical self-reflection.
Chapter 2: Method

As previously mentioned, this study was conceived of based on my applied experiences as a teaching assistant in the courses in focus. In the following section I will address some of the ways in which my personal involvement with the program impacted my methodological approach, and how this is addressed within my thesis. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University in which the study was conducted. The ethics approval form is attached as Appendix B.

Ontology and Epistemology

For the purpose of this study I have taken a social constructivist position. The stories told by the participants were treated as a construction of reality. In other words, the stories and information shared represented the student perspective in that moment, rather than an objective “reality”. In this way, this study assumed that meaning can be constructed through social discourse (Bruner, 1990). Not only was the meaning constructed by the participant writing and telling the story of their practicum experience for the purpose of the course, it was also constructed by the researcher in the context of the interview.

The analysis and resulting themes did not exist inherently in the data but were influenced and interpreted through the lens of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study also takes a contextualist approach in that it recognizes that there are numerous ways in which context influences meaning-making (Willig, 1999) and that meaning making cannot be separated from context (Josselson, 2011). Particular contexts of interest within this study include the classroom setting and teaching that occurred, the practicum setting in which the applied learning experiences occurred as well as the student’s supervisor who directed and evaluated the learning. These contexts were all discussed explicitly within the interviews and considered when
reviewing themes. My previous experience in the courses and applied settings in which the students completed the practicum course also influenced my interpretation of the data.

**Setting**

This research took place at a mid-sized university in Ontario, within the same department that I belong to as a graduate student, an interdisciplinary social science program with a developmental focus. The interviews were conducted in my office or in another room in the same building. In either setting the participant and interviewer had privacy during the interview.

**Recruitment Procedure**

Participants were recruited via a targeted email, which was directed to all students who had taken one of the courses in focus in the past four semesters (Appendix C). This list was provided by the practicum coordinator. Students who had Dr. Andrea Breen as a Professor or myself as a Teaching Assistant in the current semester were excluded from the study. The participants were required to have completed the course, and their final grades had to have been submitted so as to ensure that participating in the study did not affect their grades. All participants who replied to the email were provided with an opportunity to participate in the study. Students provided their critical reflection data via email before the interview, and then arranged (via email) a time to meet with me.

**Participants**

The study was conducted with nine participants who had all taken the courses in focus within the past four semesters (winter 2011, fall 2012, winter 2012, and fall 2013). Seven out of the nine were in the adult-stream, and two were in the youth-stream of the program. Participants had completed placements in a wide range of settings including the following: a retirement
home, a women’s shelter, a residential program for individuals with mental health issues, a crisis line for individuals with mental health issues, a resource classroom for youth with developmental differences and behaviour concerns, a mainstream school where the student worked with youth with disabilities in different classrooms, an alternative school for at-risk youth, a volunteer mentoring agency and a volunteer recruitment centre.

These participants were generally in their fourth or fifth year of university, and ranged in age from 20-26. One participant was male and the rest were female. One participant was of a minority race group and the rest were Caucasian. The sexual orientation of participants was not known and was not discussed in interviews. Seven out of nine participants were still currently enrolled as a student at the University in focus, while two had graduated prior to the interview.

It is very important to note that I was the teaching assistant in the course of interest for eight out of the nine participants who completed the follow-up interview. This means that these participants had a previous relationship with me as their teaching assistant, but their final grades had been submitted and they were made aware that their participation in the study was confidential and had no bearing on their academic achievement. This is also relevant because it meant that in some cases Dr. Andrea Breen and I were involved in teaching students about critical reflection and so the personal position that I address in the literature review reflects the assumptions that I may have passed on to students participating in this study. These assumptions will continue to be addressed in the discussion of this paper as I acknowledge the influence that my role as an instructor in the course has had on the results of the study.
**Interview Schedule**

The follow-up interviews were based on a set of questions from general to specific about the practicum experience as a whole, the student’s experience with critical self-reflection in and beyond the course, and various questions about the participants’ views of the population they worked with before, during, and after the course. Students were also asked professional development-related questions in order to see if there were ways in which the overall practicum experience might have led to developments in professional identity. The interviews varied significantly in length, ranging from twenty minutes to an hour and thirty minutes based on the length of response to various questions.

**Data**

The data set for each participant consisted of the three critical self-reflections written by students for the completion of the courses in focus, as well as the transcript from the interview conducted after the final grades had been submitted and within a year of the completion of the course. Nine participants participated in the follow-up interview, and eight of the nine were also able to provide all of their critical self-reflections, while one could only provide one of the three she had written for the course. All interview transcripts were included as data as were critical self-reflections, but the critical self-reflections submitted by the student who withdrew before completing the interview were not included as data. Therefore, there were 9 participant data sets used in the analysis. The decision not to use her written critical reflections as data was made based on the fact that in the interview participants were able to describe whether what they wrote in their reflections was accurate and relevant, and without the follow-up interview it was impossible to know this.
Data Analysis

The type of data analysis that was conducted was a thematic analysis, using the process outlined by Braun & Clarke in their influential 2006 article. This study used an inductive approach that was grounded in the data and that privileged the meaning-making of participants. All data collected from each participant (reflections and interview) was treated as one unit. I did not re-read critical reflections before the interview, nor did I ask participants to do so. In this way I was not biased by what I had just read in their reflections. This allowed the participant to guide the conversation and ensured that he or she did not feel obligated to speak only about the stories, themes and concepts presented in his or her reflections.

I first familiarized myself with the data by reading through each participant’s data set (all of the pieces of data together) several times. I then looked for salient or repetitive meanings made by participants and did not engage in extensive interpretation of the data. Therefore, the approach that I used was a semantic approach in that it did not attempt to interpret the data but instead, used the meanings made by participants to create themes and subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In other words, I have mostly attempted to represent the data based on what the students have said about their experiences, rather than reading into their words potential implicit meanings.

I engaged in reflexive memoing throughout the process. Due to my previous relationship with the majority of participants it was important for me to acknowledge my assumptions about their experiences. Throughout the process I attempted to reflect on how my relationship with the student may have shaped the interview and to set acknowledge my biases relative to each student in my analysis. I tried very hard to focus on what was being said (semantic approach) rather than
inferring beyond that data so that my results were not based on my understanding of their experience, but rather focused on their analysis of it.

It is my opinion that previous relationships held with students provided a very useful contextual understanding of the places and individuals being discussed. I am very familiar with the agencies in which these individuals were placed as well as some of the supervisors with whom they worked. This knowledge provided an interesting layer of context that helped me to ask more effective probing questions in the follow-up interviews. I was also aware of their level of engagement as students, and had some information about how well they performed in their placement. In many cases I remembered how they represented their experiences in class versus in their critical self-reflections and interviews, which also helped in asking helpful probing questions. Thus, I was able to use my previous experiences with the student to remind each of some of the aspects of the placement, or the class they were in. When they neglected to reference certain stories previously shared, I was able to ask about them. As well, participants mentioned how comfortable they felt with me, or how they felt comfortable sharing because they trusted I would not judge them. Finally, my previous experience with the course gave me an in-depth understanding of the curriculum and the different pedagogies used by various professors who taught it, which meant that I was intimately familiar with the documents, ideas, and approaches that participants referred to in interviews.

**Chapter 3: Results**

Participants provided written critical self-reflections and participated in follow-up interviews addressing their experience with critical self-reflection in practicum. In examining student critical self-reflections and follow up interviews, I formulated two themes, each with two sub-themes, to reflect student experiences with the self-reflection exercise and overall learning in
practicum. These are: (1) *Critical self-reflection and transformative learning are relational in nature*, and its two sub-themes (1a) *Learning through listening: Developing critical consciousness in practicum*, and (1b) *An individual is more than their diagnosis: Uncovering the capacity and diversity of marginalized groups*; and (2) *The relational opportunities in human service practicums lead to personal and professional identity development*, with its two subthemes (2a) *Recognition of personal and professional values within practicum and experiences of dissonance* and (2b) *Role models in practicum: The importance of supervisors, and other professionals as role models in professional identity development*

**Critical self-reflections as data.** In analyzing the data (both critical self-reflections and interviews together), I found that the critical self-reflections were less useful as a form of data for the purposes of this study than I originally believed. Significantly, four out of nine participants identified this as an issue during the interviews, with one indicating that because they wrote their critical self-reflections for course credit, they had approached the crafting of the content with this in mind rather than approaching the writing exercise purely as an opportunity for personal reflection. Another participant noted that they had exaggerated stories or placed meanings on experiences that they believed were relevant to the professor or TA. In reading the critical self-reflections as data, I found that the papers often seemed to be written with the goal of persuading the reader of a particular perspective.

More nuanced and varied reflections around the same issues came out in the interviews, revealing deeper and more complex perspectives concerning what participants were encountering in their practicum. Participants certainly viewed the process of written reflection, both in the form of field notes and formal reflections, as a valuable learning experience. Despite this, nearly half of participants admitted that for various reasons (wanting to get a good grade, not wanting to
share personal information, etc.) they did not feel that they could be completely honest and direct in their reflections. For these reasons, my analysis focuses on the interviews and participants’ discussion of how they used the critical reflections, rather than emphasizing the content of the reflections themselves. The contents of critical self-reflections were included in the results, but only in cases where the views and perspectives provided were consistent with those of the follow-up interview.

The interviews with students provided insight into how they responded to the experience of engaging in critical self-reflection and whether they felt it was valuable, or should be used again in the future. The interviews also provided insight into issues that arose for students in different roles and across diverse settings, and how these experiences as well as their practicum supervisor’s professional orientation might have impacted their own experience and learning. As described above, students indicated in various ways that they could be more honest and forthcoming in a format where their responses were not tied to grades. It is also possible that face to face interviews provided more rich insight into student experiences because students had more time to reflect on their overall learnings.

**Critical Self-Reflection and Transformative Learning are Relational in Nature**

**Learning through Listening: Developing critical consciousness in practicum.** When participants described their learning experiences and epiphanies within the context of practicum, they were asked “where” the learning happens. The most common response to this question was that they learned through hearing stories from or in conversations with those with whom they worked. In this way, they described their transformative learning experiences as relational, in that they were rooted in interactions with others and others’ stories. This was particularly true in
terms of developing critically conscious perspectives. Only one participant did not work directly with a client population, but she indicated that she learned about the population from stories told by other service providers she encountered in practicum. In the following quote, Participant 2 describes the importance of stories for her own learning:

Through the relationships I held with the older adults at the home I was able to gain insight into the diversity of backgrounds and situations the individual residents had experienced, ranging from learning something as simple as their day to day activities to something more complex such as war stories. (Participant 2, Critical reflection 1)

Despite not being able to engage in the work she was interested in (her placement involved planning recreation activities, while her interests centred on counselling and mental health), this participant was still able to learn a great deal about the placement population simply by listening to their stories. Participants found that stories provided them with a deeper understanding of the contextual and subjective experiences that may have led to an individual’s current position. Participant 9 described learning what might lead to issues with school attendance by hearing client stories in an alternative school setting:

I: Can you tell me about a specific turning point that might have occurred in your understanding of others?

P: I think just listening to their lives. Like there was one student who I was technically assigned to but I think I only worked with her a couple times because she just never came to school. And I think she was maybe 18 and only had a few high school credits. And you know I could hear the teachers talk about her like “Oh this is an extreme situation she really needs to graduate high school” so just talking to her about her anxiety problems and
what’s stopping her from coming to school, what she’s experienced in the past. You know I helped her prepare for an interview at a Chinese food restaurant and she had never even thought about preparing and she just thought it was so weird that I was asking her these questions because she had never really thought about even analyzing herself to answer the questions. But at the end she really appreciated it and she got the job. So yeah just hearing about another student’s relationship with their mom, or hearing about another student’s drug problem. Or hearing about where they’ve come from or where they want to go sort of thing. (Participant 9, Interview)

In this excerpt the participant demonstrated that she gained significant insight into the connections between the client’s subjective experiences and her current circumstances with regard to her education and employment. Through working and conversing with the client around a job interview, this participant also began to understand that people may have very different skills and degrees of self-awareness based on their life experiences. Listening to client stories was also important for participants to call into question stigma around marginalized groups, such as individuals with mental health issues. As Participant 9 noted,

Definitely comfort level was a big thing but it was just learning about how to talk to different people. And I think lots of stigma surrounding mental illnesses and validating and listening to people’s stories and allowing people to…I think one of the biggest ones was…you know everyone has especially for that position apprehensions about suicide and dealing and talking with someone who has suicidal ideations. But something that I have found more interesting was just if we were talking to someone and to us it could sound like delusional thinking and things that are not present for us, but for that person it is something real. So they could be talking about…you know…having monsters under
their bed but being able to talk with them about how they are feeling in that position right now and letting them know that you’re listening and coming to know that for them it is real. So coming to that understanding was an important thing for me to gain. (Participant 3, Interview)

In the excerpt above, the participant discussed how she developed new insight into the mental health experiences of others. Through her crisis calls with clients, she began to realize how hallucinations or cognitive distortions impact individuals who are experiencing them. This lead her to place primary importance on supporting the individual in how they are feeling, rather than on trying to convince them that what they are experiencing is not “real” Ultimately, conversations with both clients and staff seemed to have a critical impact on participants’ perceptions of the clients with whom they have worked and their understanding of the work they were doing, as Participant 6 suggested:

You go into it and you don’t really know what’s happening but it was really nice talking to the woman and talking to staff and having a better understanding of it and I felt safe being there as time went on and I realized that it was actually a really good experience. And like yeah getting to know the staff and stuff they told me their stories about when they first started too and umm like same kind of stories of like women like you know had some crazy stories but I think in the end it was a really beneficial experience and like a real eye opener to kind of see like a different perspective kind of. (Participant 6, Interview)

While stories and conversations with clients seemed to produce a deeper understanding of client experiences, and a greater consciousness of bias and stigma, conversations with staff
provided a greater understanding of the context in which participants were doing their placements. For example, in the excerpt below a participant describes her conversations with her supervisor as contributing to her understanding of the community in which she was placed and what that community had to offer for the client population she encountered:

I: Awesome, okay so where did this learning happen?

P: Umm I think it was a combination of while I was there in the office working on things but I think umm in terms of context definitely in conversations with people. So even I would sit down with my supervisor at the placement 2 or 3 times a week and we would just chat about where things were going and where I was at and I was able to show her what I was working on and a lot of the gaps and changes I had to make were based on like being completely ignorant of what the [name of city] community had to offer. So in conversations with people I learned a lot and I would take that and sit down with the head of the senior’s centre and she would be like oh you’re missing all of this. And I would be like “woah” and just kind of building things like that and so I think conversations for me were really the context that helped. (Participant 1, Interview)

In the excerpt above, this participant describes conversations with her supervisor as the main vehicle for learning about the client population she was serving. That she chose to highlight supervisor-supervisee conversations as being most beneficial to her learning is interesting because this participant is the only one who did not work directly with clients. It appears that even where the participant could not directly interact with clients, her ability to interact informally with her supervisor was still a major contributor to learning about client populations.
In the excerpts provided above it is evident that conversations and stories gleaned from clients and workers in practicum settings contributed to the development of students’ critical consciousness. Stories and conversations provided the “material” for reflection, and helped lead to various aspects of transformative learning. Stories and conversations lent themselves especially to understanding the subjective experiences of others as they may differ from that of the participant. They led the participant to understand more about connections between subject position and life experiences, access to resources etc. These stories and conversations also led the student participants to confront their stereotypic attitudes and thus, reduce their own tendencies to stigmatize individuals with various labels or diagnoses. The transformative learning that occurred for students with respect to their taken-for-granted attitudes and beliefs about mental health labels and diagnoses will be discussed in the next subtheme.

An individual is more than their diagnosis: Uncovering the capacity and diversity of marginalized groups. The most common and salient change in knowledge or understanding that participants described in both their critical self-reflections and their interviews was learning to view the individuals with whom they worked as whole people, or understanding them beyond their diagnosis. The groups of individuals discussed in relation to this theme include: “at-risk youth”, individuals with mental illness, older adults, and individuals with disabilities. Many participants broached this topic with comments like “it sounds obvious now but…” or “I can’t believe I used to think differently but…” because it was surprising for them to remember how they used to view individuals from these groups before their applied experience. Many participants described realizing the “humanity” of those with whom they worked as a central learning experience. Some also mentioned learning how diverse, resilient, and capable members
of the populations with whom they worked were, through interacting with them in the practicum setting.

For some participants, this shift occurred as they realized how much diversity existed within the group with which they were interacting. Participant 3 states:

So with mental illness I got to see…and I see broad spectrums of—there could be two callers that could be diagnosed with the same mental illness and they are different. Which it’s like OBVIOUSLY…it’s just one of those moments where you are like OBVIOUSLY they are two different people! (Participant 3, Interview)

By receiving phone calls from individuals with similar diagnoses who had very different struggles, behaviours and personalities, this participant learned about the level of diversity within subpopulations of individuals with various mental health diagnoses. While she may previously have understood that every person is different, it took an applied experience for her to truly realize the diversity of people who possess a particular diagnosis, or who struggle with mental health issues.

It is clear in the data that many participants held deficit-based and stereotypical perspectives of clients and that it wasn’t until they were charged with the responsibility of building relationships with people that they began to realize how incomplete their visions of these individuals were. Repeatedly, participants admitted to being humbled by their encounters with members of marginalized groups. One participant explained how, ultimately, she learned that the population with whom she interacted for placement was quite diverse and that one could not make any blanket statement about it:
I guess just not necessarily I came to a conclusion at the end. Not necessarily at-risk youth are “blank” but just recognising how diverse they are and that there are so many different issues and life experiences that have brought them to that point. And just hearing their stories, hearing their struggles, hearing their goals for the future. You know they’re all very different and they all…you know…need a different kind of care and support. So it’s not like a “One size fits all” kind of population. (Participant 9, Interview)

In the excerpt above, Participant 9 demonstrates a degree of critical consciousness in that she begins to understand the complexity of a particular social issue or population rather than coming to one particular finite conclusion about it. Through her relationships with the youth in the alternative environment of her placement, she was able to see their individuality and how complex and layered their experiences were.

Learning about the diverse strengths and abilities of individuals helped participants’ work with these populations. For example, participant 5 described being afraid of a student in her class due to his angry outbursts but, after learning more about him, she realized that he was not going to hurt her and was able to more effectively tutor him (Participant 5, p. 1). These new understandings also allowed participants to begin let go of their pity and sympathy for individuals and to view them as strong and capable:

Yeah definitely like especially being in a shelter for abused women like before I didn’t have much knowledge on exactly what that meant and you know I just was very naive about it. And then like being in like that environment like I don’t…like I don’t necessarily have like the sympathy that I would have had before. Like you think of those stories and
you think oh my gosh that’s terrible but like these women are so strong the strongest women I’ve ever met and my views have completely changed and like wanting to make a change and understanding like the feminist theory better and stuff. And you know seeing like their power to change and want to change is really inspiring so… (Participant 6, Interview)

In the quote above, the participant describes a change in the way she understood the women who used the services at her placement. She describes shifting from feeling sorry for people who have experienced abuse to realizing how strong they are to survive and to leave an abusive situation. By reflecting on the experiences told, she began to see that these women were resilient which, in turn, led her to develop a more critically conscious understanding of the dynamic between helper and client. This shift may have led her to provide support in a more strengths-based way, knowing that the aim of helping was not pitying, but finding ways of supporting women to empower themselves.

Learning about the diversity of a population was a very common experience. One participant explains why her setting gave her a different perspective on mental illness compared with perspectives previously presented in her program of study:

Yeah so I learned about it in psychology and stuff but you learn about the mental illness not the person and that is huge. So I think that even fed me more of my ignorance when I learned about the mental illness because you learn about the side effects, you learn about the medication, you don’t learn about the person and I think that’s what’s really missing. Umm and I think that needs to be put in the educational system at an earlier umm time in a kid’s life so… (Participant 4, Interview)
It was evident from this statement and others that often participants held a deficit-based view of individuals with mental differences and disabilities, such as those diagnosed with mental illness, before their practicum. Through their practicum, it was very common for participants to begin to see the strengths of such individuals. In some cases this occurred because individuals did things outside of the expectations of the student, and in other cases, it developed through the time that students spent with individuals from this group. Therefore, not only did participants learn about the diversity of individuals with diagnostic labels, in many cases they also learned about the capacity or humanity of these individuals. Participant 4 explains:

And you can have normal conversations with them which to be honest I didn’t think that in the beginning when I thought mental illness I thought wow these people are…not “bat shit crazy” but they have they are not capable of having normal interactions. So that is something that I also learned while being there and I had a lot of good conversations with residents, there was laughs, some of them opened up to me and that was fantastic and I began to see them more as people rather than sick people I guess is how you’d say it (Participant 4, Interview)

The participant mentioned understanding a person with mental illness as a “person” rather than a “sick person”. This change of term suggests that the participant moved from an understanding people with mental illness as being defined by that illness to an understanding of mental illness as only one aspect of an individual’s overall subjective experience. This shift is described as having occurred through relationships that participants built with clients. The above participant talks about sharing laughs and important conversations as significant in precipitating the change. Therefore, the student’s relationship with clients facilitated movement towards more critical, person-centred perspective on mental illness. Most individuals interviewed similarly learned
something about the capacity and resilience of those with whom they worked. In the story below, Participant 6 describes a surprising experience with a client:

I was feeling sympathetic for E in the beginning but she maintained a very happy and humorous tone throughout the meeting which made me feel a lot better. This surprised me because I assumed a women dealing with 30 years of abuse would be much more traumatized. (Participant 6, Critical Reflection 1)

The participant did not believe that a “traumatized woman” would be likely to make jokes. She did not expect the level of resilience that the woman displayed, due to the trauma she had experienced. This provided the participant with insight into the complexity and strength of individuals who have experienced violence. In another case, Participant 5 described working in a classroom setting with a young man diagnosed with schizophrenia who did not speak to anyone or read anything all year. Others believed that he could not read. When the participant took him into a separate room in an attempt to read to him, he suddenly the grabbed the book, read a paragraph and then threw it back to her. He refused to engage with the participant for the remainder of the class and was not observed reading again, but she was shocked and amazed by his ability (Participant 5, Interview). From this experience, the participant learned that capacity may not be the issue; in some cases, an individual may simply be resisting something for reasons others may not understand.

Ultimately, almost all participants expressed a similar sentiment: that they underestimated the diversity, capacity, and resilience of the population they were serving. They each moved from a deficit-based view of the group to one that recognised group members’ capacities. The relationships they forged with clients provided new perspectives on the humanity
of the individuals encountered in practicum settings, and ultimately, this led to the development of a more critically conscious perspective regarding various labels and diagnoses. A few participants also noted how this new understanding would influence their future interactions and interventions with the group of interest, because they would be more aware of what to expect.

The Relational Opportunities in Human Service Practicums lead to Personal and Professional Identity Development

Recognition of personal and professional values within practicum and experiences of dissonance. A second theme, described in depth by two participants and more briefly by three others, was their experience of critical self-reflection as a method for recognising their personal and professional values and identities. Critical self-reflection allowed participants to gain a deeper understanding of their personal values as these interacted with their professional values, in order to integrate an emerging professional identity with an existing personal one. In some instances, relational experiences in practicum led to a confirmation of values or beliefs, while in other instances these experiences led to an acknowledgement of dissonance between personal and professional values or identities.

In the following quote, participant 7 explains the value of critical self-reflection for her self-understanding:

Self-reflection for me means understanding my own feelings around a situation. Like you know your own personality traits and you know what you like and what you don’t like. And so when an adverse situation happens that you don’t like. It is helpful to know what was it about that situation that bothers you and to get in deeper to the real reason because often times it’s not the surface reason that you’re actually upset about. And so I
think…yeah that’s kind of what it means. Just like digging deeper below the surface problem. (Participant 7, Interview)

In this response, Participant 7 explains that critical self-reflection helped her explore her own professional identity both through positive and negative experiences (“what you like and what you don’t like”). Through reflection, she feels that she is able to understand herself on a deeper level. Below participant 8 reflects a similar sentiment:

I guess it means understanding where you are…like where your thoughts and feelings are in relation to your experiences and how you’re taking those experiences and applying them to your personal development and your relational development and your career and how you’re integrating those things into your everyday experiences and if you can find relations between like your reactions and your feelings umm like the way that you react and your biases and where you’re coming from and how your experiences have opened up like the window like you see how you need to change and how you’re now compared to where you thought you were. (Participant 8, Interview)

This second excerpt also echoes some thoughts around the importance of reflection in relation to ethical professional development, and the importance of understanding the self as a key aspect to being a better human service worker. She is also able to explicitly identify the concept of integration of various aspects of identity (personal, relational and professional), and sees critical reflection as a way of moving towards the integration of these. While in some cases, participants learned something that they needed to develop in themselves in order to become a better professional, others learned accepted that they may be better at some things than others, and they felt that this helped them narrow their focus in terms of their professional role.
Participant 9 describes the type of learning that occurs in practicum:

I think so. I think it is a significantly different type of learning than behaviour modification or a psych class or just textbook work. You learn about yourself, you learn about people that you haven’t met before, different populations. You learn about your strengths and weaknesses and ways that you want to improve and you know certain things that you don’t necessarily want to improve on but things you didn’t realize about yourself that you want to improve on or about what path you want to take. Or oh I’m not so good with this population vs. this population. (Participant 9, Interview)

As in the excerpt above, participants frequently mentioned how much they learned about themselves from the process of participating in practicum. This was consistently evident in the written reflections that were submitted for this project as well as in the follow-up interviews. For many of the participants, this was the first time they were attempting to participate in a work environment within their desired field, and many learned a great deal about themselves in a professional context. They also learned about how they may fit into specific fields and had a number of confirmatory as well as negative experiences, which helped guide them in developing their sense of themselves as professionals.

A common way in which individuals reported learning about themselves was in dealing with challenging situations. In some cases, challenging situations created internal conflicts for students who confronted the competing demands of professional responsibilities. For example, in the passage below participant 4 discusses his struggles in a situation where he had multiple responsibilities:
On this particular day, I had to help motivate residents to do their house cleaning chore. I was very "focused" on accomplishing this task and my last obstacle was getting Yajirobe to do her task. I repeatedly asked her to accomplish her chore as everyone was doing their part to make sure the house was clean. Eventually, I had crossed Yajirobe's line and she verbally lashed out towards me in a way I have never experienced before… My mindset was on making sure my duty was fulfilled which resulted in pushing aside what I had read beforehand [he had read that the participant had a bad weekend with her family and was emotionally distressed] and narrowing my field of vision regarding her feelings. As a result of the lack of vision, I had lost some respect and the relationship became damaged.

(Participant 4, Critical Reflection 1)

He described the reflective process that allowed him to “widen the area of vision and not only focus on one aspect as a staff member” (Participant 4, Critical Reflection 1, p. 2). In engaging in self-reflection, the participant realized that he was too focused on the task at hand and achieving the measurable outcome to the detriment of the individual who needed support in expressing and processing their feelings. In this reflection, the participant was able to explore various demands placed on him in his role as a human service professional: to be a professional who completes the tasks that are assigned to him, and to be a professional who builds healthy supportive relationships with clients. Through the process of critical self-reflection this individual began to acknowledge various demands placed on workers and to prioritize these (supportive relationship goes before completing tasks as assigned).

1 pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality of the clients being discussed.
In another challenging situation, participant 8 was placed in a setting that did not align with the type she had wanted for her practicum. Through this experience, she learned that she needs to work on flexibility and adaptability in work situations. Placed in a setting where she was supposed to run youth groups, she instead repeatedly encountered postponement of such programming. Overall, she discusses in her reflections and interview realizing the importance of being flexible in professional situations.

Another major aspect of practicum that challenged participants’ understandings of their professional values was being faced with rules and policies. One participant wrote in her critical self-reflection and spoke in her interview about grappling with the confidentiality requirements of her placement. She worked on an anonymous chat line, and struggled with the power dynamics inherent with the confidentiality policy of not sharing her name with callers:

So it is really a need but it is one of those things that I’m like I don’t know how I feel about this but it does make me uncomfortable. So yeah that was something that I could say that was something negative. But it was just an “uncomfortableness” where I think…because it is confidential the caller has the chance to say their name but I don’t. So it kind of put me at odds with how I felt about it. (Participant 3, Interview)

She goes on to explain that the confidentiality rule was imbalanced. Though she would often recognize callers in everyday interactions in her community, callers could not recognise her. She felt this was an unfair dynamic and decided, due to the false pretense of confidentiality, that she would likely go into a form of counselling in which she worked with individuals face to face.
In another case, a participant described struggling with being in a setting wherein Catholic rituals were practiced. In the excerpts that follow, she told how she judged some of these practices:

I was in a catholic school so there was a lot of things that just didn’t seem right based on our education and what we learn about adolescent development and things that are really important to learn about. They just seemed ignored and whether or not you’re in a Catholic school, I feel that youth are undervalued and they don’t seem to have the same…people don’t consider them to be like actively participating for some reason and so I think that the education system could benefit from a reform which I know a lot of people already thing but…

I: Yeah. Okay so can you think of…what umm…can you think of something specific around like you mentioned something around it being a Catholic school and maybe there is something that they value or teach or don’t value and don’t teach. Is there something specific you can think of…I guess a specific thing that they did that you didn’t like?

P: I can’t remember. I know that there was something whether or not it was about the uniforms or the just the way that they dealt with things that I didn’t feel were right. But I mean like that could happen in the public system too. I don’t…I felt like in the Catholic system there was a lot of time wasted on religious stuff when half the kids honestly did not care. Probably more than half like 95% of the kids could not have cared less about that stuff and it’s not influencing them. I feel like it makes no difference whether or not they say the Lord’s Prayer in the morning or not like they don’t do it anyway. They’re not listening they’re talking to their friend. Like if they want to integrate religion into the
school system there could have been a better way rather than wasting 10 minutes in the morning on announcements saying prayers or like stuff like that. (Participant 8, p. 9)

Not only did she struggle with some of the rules, and their relevance to the group, she also struggled with questions about how to act appropriately as a role model in that setting:

Umm not really I guess the only thing goes back to like the Catholic thing. I thought that I’d be comfortable in a Catholic school but I found that I wasn’t as comfortable as I thought I’d be. And it’s not like I am like a spiritual person like I believe in like higher beings and stuff it was just the structure and the…because I’m not Catholic so I’ve always been okay with like…people can do their Catholic thing and it was just like standing there for like the morning prayers like I didn’t know like the cross over the heart and I felt like maybe the teachers might judge me for not knowing or should I be doing it to be a good role model for the students? Or is it good for them to see me not do it? I didn’t know how to navigate that situation. (Participant 8, Interview)

Here she describes the struggle with trying to be a role model when she does not practice the same beliefs as teachers and students in a religious school, and even reveals her own fears of being judged. This feeling of judging and being judged creates dissonance for the participant, as she has never been uncomfortable with Catholicism before. It is only in this setting that she learns about her professional self in relation to others’ religious practices. She learns that while she is personally comfortable with Catholics expressing their beliefs and engaging in their religious practices, she does not wish to participate in these beliefs or practices in a professional setting. Therefore, through this experience the participant discovers a little more about her professional identity in that she would prefer to work in a secular setting. Overall, in being faced
with ethically complex situations, some participants were able to develop a greater sense of their professional orientation and aspirations.

In other cases, the dissonance expressed by participants was created by the collision of personal experiences outside of the practicum setting with professional experiences in the practicum. One participant described how his own mental health concerns collided with the mental health issues he encountered in his placement. He described this experience as one that made it challenging for him to process what was going on both at the placement and in his personal life:

Midway through the practicum I had a bunch of other things going on and I was…I had some family issues and I had…I was going through umm my own kind of like diagnosis so I had issues going on as well umm so that was tough on me personally and then coming…going back to [Mental Health Agency] and then struggling with their kind of issues. (Participant 4, Interview)

In the excerpt above the Participant 4 struggled with reconciling his personal identity with his professional one. He had just recently received his own mental health diagnosis, while being placed in a practicum working with individuals with mental health issues, and for him this posed a struggle. This shift in experience created a conflict for the participant in that he wasn’t sure if he could support others with their struggles when he was having struggles of his own. On the other hand, the shift in personal identity and insight into experiences with mental health struggles helped him to understand his professional role in a different way. He experienced a shift from thinking that his role was to “help sick people” to understanding that just providing support and active listening was often all that was needed:
And I learned that umm in the beginning I was kind of seeing the residents as people who were like sick and like kind of labelling them as…as that and I wasn’t thinking that these are regular people who have a chance at a regular life and that was part of why I was kind of beating myself up is that you know…how do I help these sick people? (Participant 4, Interview)

The most in-depth example of the struggle towards integrating various identities was in the interview with Participant 1, where she struggles to integrate her sense of professional self with her imagined and anticipated identity as a future mother. Below she describes the role that critical reflection played in helping her to realize that this tension between personal and professional goals existed:

Umm so reflecting about it realizing…so complaining about it I realized that I hated it and it was driving me nuts and I didn’t understand it. But reflecting on it I better understood my values and beliefs and I was able to kind of take a second look at it and be like okay maybe I do value that kind of work environment. So in a complaint I had a snap judgement about the work environment but reflecting…even though it still makes me super uncomfortable to work in an environment where people won’t buckle down and work every once in a while. I’ve definitely learned the pros and cons and kind of thought about it a bit more. Umm and kind of changed my opinions whereas before I wouldn’t have.

(Participant 1, Interview)

The dynamic that is being referred to in the above statement was a major theme in the interview with Participant 1. She described being faced with internal tension around how the staff at her placement manage family and work obligations. This participant describes feeling that the work environment was one where individuals were “not very hardworking” because they
were always taking time off to be with their families. For example, she described a situation where a woman was granted three days of in order to travel to a dance competition for her daughter on very short notice. The participant felt that it was irresponsible for this woman to just spontaneously leave when there was a great deal of work to do, and this made her feel judgemental of the culture in this workplace:

So everyone is writing in everyone else’s schedules in case they wanted to book time with them or have a meeting and they have an opportunity then to book it. And this one woman was just like “Yeah well umm” her daughter has a dance thing that she just found out about so she’s leaving for three days. And I was just like “What?!”. And I think that the executive director was like well payroll is in that and she’s the administrator. So she left for the three days and nobody was going to get paid how we are going to fix this. And so just seeing that process of okay how are we going to work that out? (Participant 1, Interview)

At first, participant 1 describes reacting very negatively to this situation and the woman who wanted the time off, feeling that it was very unprofessional. Over time and through engaging in the process of reflection, however, she begins to realize that she is being judgemental and that there are benefits to this type of work environment:

So the environment just didn’t function with like my view of a work force but as we started going through I started realizing there were pros to that. So umm it was all women who worked there who all have kids so that allowed them that flexibility in terms of how strict the work force was it also allowed them to go pick up their kids early if one of them was sick and allowed them to work late or early accordingly. So I think that was really positive but I definitely at the beginning was just seeing the cons I was like “what are you guys
doing I just couldn’t wrap my head around that environment where they would stand there and talk and it wasn’t even their lunch hour. Like one day two of the women went out and they were like we’re going to go for a walk and they just left for like an hour and a half…went for a walk (in a sarcastic voice) and came back and so I think that was definitely different. (Participant 1, Interview)

After engaging in the process of critical self-reflection, this participant explains how she began to consider the fact that she is a woman who would like to have children one day. In exploring the idea of her possible future self as a mother, she realized she may want to be the kind of mother who is equally available to her children. This would mean that she might benefit from working in such a flexible environment. She then began to realize the incongruence between her existing concept of her future professional and personal selves. While she does not entirely adjust her professional self-concept to suit her existing understanding of her future self as a mother, she begins to understand that there is a tension between these:

P: I think I learned where some of my biases lie-that I think had about 8 employees that were all working mothers I think I learned a lot kind of about that environment because I want kids and I want to work so how does that kind of go together? But I also had kind of a very traditional sense of how the workforce should be but I think for me those two ideas were kind of challenged because they don’t always mesh together. So think for me I learned a lot about what I want to value in myself as a family and also as a professional and a working woman. And then seeing it in action with like 8 or 9 women and they all handled it differently. It’s something like…yeah I want kids and I want a job but I never like been in an environment where they’ve kind of meshed in so many ways. So I think seeing that made me realize like how I couldn’t do that and vice versa (Participant 1, Interview)
Participants stated numerous experiences in practicum in which they learned more about themselves in some cases due to discovering a tension between various aspects of their understanding of themselves as a professional or a tension between professional and other existing identities. In some cases participants found themselves uncomfortable with certain situations due to various personal or professional identities. In most cases, participants were able to use the process of critical self-reflection to draw conclusions about themselves and begin to develop and refine their professional identities. Supervisors and other workers in the setting often provided examples of professional identities to explore.

**Role models in practicum: The importance of supervisors, and other professionals as role models in professional identity development.** The second subtheme that emerged in relation to the overall theme *The Relational Nature of Transformative Learning in Human Service Practicums leads to Personal and Professional Identity Development* was the role of professionals in practicum setting as role models. Supervision was one of the most widely discussed topics in participant interviews. Regardless of whether the experience with supervision was positive, negative, or neutral, supervisors or sometimes other professionals in the practicum setting often emerged as very important contributors to professional identity development. Participants of the study describe numerous ways in which aspects of professional identity are developed or understood in relation to others as positive and negative role models in practicum.

It is important to note here (as mentioned in the literature review) that a “negative” role model is not a person who is a “bad” role model, but someone who espouses a quality, belief or practice that is determined to be in opposition to the emerging identity of the participant. A person can also act as a negative role model in one respect and a positive role model in another. For example, a practicum student may find their supervisor to be a positive role model in terms
of the way he or she communicates respectfully with clients, but a negative role model in that he or she is not frequently supportive of staff. The concept of supervision was discussed in all interviews, despite the fact that there was no structured question addressing it. Supervisors and other workers in the practicum setting often emerged as positive and/or negative role models for the participants, advertently or inadvertently helping to guide them towards a greater understanding of their own professional values and identity.

Some participants mentioned supervision to say that they benefited from their relationship with their supervisor in terms of learning and/or support, while others chose to identify some struggles they had with supervision. The most common concern with supervision was the lack of presence of the individual who was designated to be the supervisor of the student, while the student was in practicum. Some students would have worked with a few different supervisors, but generally one supervisor was designated to oversee their position and to eventually provide them with a grade.

Three participants suggested that the presence of the supervisor would help with scaffolding around skill development. While two of these participants mentioned that they did have a very present supervisor who would discuss issues and support the learning of the participants, while the third participant did not. As a result this participant felt he did not learn as much as he otherwise would have. From the positive experience with supervision, participant 9 explained that she learned that she would prefer to work in a setting where they are receiving frequent feedback and guidance from a supervisor, that this was important for her learning as a helping professional. Overall, it was clear that participants felt that supervisors either did or should play a significant role in learning and professional development.
As discussed in the first sub-theme section above, participant 1 spoke at length about what she learned about herself as a professional from practicum in relation to the women that she worked with. She described how being placed in a professional context with women who held positions she might want to hold in the future helped her learn about the type of setting she would like to work in. It also allowed her to look at her beliefs about her professional life and her family life, and how they might be integrated in the future. In her practicum setting the participant worked with a number of women who had both children and a full time job. The participant indicated that she would like to have children and a full time job in the future as well, but being in this setting helped her to realize how difficult it can be to manage both.

Participants described having meaningful revelations about their professional selves through their practicum experiences when they began to address discomfort with the behaviour of others in their placement. In the above excerpt participant 1 described the process of critical self-reflection as taking something she is frustrated about and using this as an opportunity for reflection. In the excerpt above, she describes realizing that she held contradictory thoughts around the issue of professionalism in the workplace. She worked with a group of women in a setting where they were able to put their family first by doing things like taking time off to take their children to a dance recital. Initially this made Participant 1 extremely uncomfortable, as her professional values involved putting work responsibilities before personal life.

As she continued to work in the setting, however she realized that the issue is more complicated than she initially thought. She realized that she would like to have her own children some day and would like to work in a context where this is supported. She stated that she feels that the experience of being in practicum and seeing how these women operated on a day to day basis then helped her to understand her professional self in relation to her future family plans. In
this way she was able to use these women as both positive and negative role models, understanding them as individuals who exhibited a dedication to their children that she may want to espouse, but also feeling that there are some actions that they engaged in that she could not accept and felt were unprofessional.

Participant 2 was working for a physical therapist in a residential setting, while her interests were more in the field of social work. For her, the focus on physical aspects of wellness was really different than what she had been interested in, as she was more interested in mental health work. She was constantly experiencing conflict over the idea of prioritizing physical health over mental health when this came up. For example, one of her roles was to encourage residents to participate in recreational activities, even when they were resistant. Her supervisor encouraged her to push residents due to the fact that it was essential to their health to participate, but this participant felt that it might be an infringement on their agency and in some cases their emotional well-being. This helped reinforce for her that she is interested in working in a setting where her focus is on the emotional well-being of the individuals she works with.

Through the process of reflecting throughout her practicum placement, participant 2 learned how much she prioritized mental wellbeing over physical health. She was uncomfortable with the way that her supervisor handled certain situations, and this process pushed her to realize the ways in which individuals from different professions may relate to the same client. She learned that she will need work in a profession and setting where the focus is on mental health. In this way her supervisor and other employees in the setting acted as negative role models in terms of their prioritization of issues, which lead the participant to a deeper understanding of her own priorities as a professional in a human service setting.
Another issue related to supervision and the role of other workers in a practicum setting mentioned by Participant 3 was the idea of being exposed to cynicism within the workplace. In all three cases the supervisor or worker(s) that were expressing cynicism confirmed for participants that this was something they did not want to integrate into their practice. This was expressed as a concern for Participant 3:

For now, cynical-ness and it’s one thing that I do see within…you know…supervisors and sometimes it’s sad…well not even sometimes it’s always sad but you know being out of school for a year and meeting people that have done similar roles to me and within five years being burnt out. So those are things I definitely fear so I’ve been meaningfully making movements towards getting away from that and escaping those type of feelings but… (Participant 3, Interview)

Through this process, participant 3 learned how important it is for her to maintain a hopeful outlook and approach over time, which can be difficult as many individuals in the field face burnout. In determining that it was important for her to avoid cynicism, she decided to begin to take steps to safeguard herself from this.

Participants also discussed a number of instances where supervisors or workers within their setting acted as positive role models. Participant 5 indicated that she learned a great deal about the kind of classroom management style she would like to have from her supervisor. In this case the supervisor acted as a positive role model in terms of demonstrating effective classroom management techniques:

Definitely my supervisor, who was like the teacher in the classroom. He was so patient and if I didn’t like…if I was uncomfortable in a situation or if the kids were I don’t know
being…they often treated me like a student as opposed to a teacher or authority figure. And at times they would ask me kind of inappropriate things like maybe you wouldn’t ask your normal teacher I don’t know I’m trying to think of an example…maybe like asking me about parties I go to or something like that. And then I would be like no…like I don’t know…and he would instantly notice it-he was always there I don’t know how…and he would instantly notice it and kind of break it up and guide them into the path of treating me like a teacher more so. I don’t know he was very like-he handled every behaviour in the class and he just like knew how to adapt all of his teaching so that each kid would be able to understand his lessons. (Participant 5, Interview).

Although Participant 5 does not explicitly mention it, it appears from this quote that she may have determined that she enjoyed an approach to working with youth in which the adult did not act as an “authority figure”, and she may have implicitly decided that this a quality she would like to adopt in working with this population.

Participant 8 discussed how she learned the importance of being persistent from one of the teachers she worked with in a special needs classroom:

Definitely the main teacher her name is Ms. [teacher name] they called her Ms. [teacher name]. She was so consistent and persistent and like never gave up on them. You could see the frustration on her face sometimes and she wouldn’t be afraid to express that to the students. Like she wouldn’t try to hide her feelings like I don’t want to hurt their feelings or they don’t deserve to be punished because they don’t know what they’re doing… but she really treated them like…she did give them some exceptions and like she was really great at tailoring the material to their specific needs. But at the same times she would
challenge them to meet each other’s levels. And she gave them some consistency and some
different activities to do every day and that really helped them like they’d do garbage every
Friday so they’d go around to all the classrooms and work together to collect all the
garbage and they’d have to put it in the right receptacles. Yeah so they’d have to do that
and the one guy didn’t like to do garbage and he would say ugh I don’t want to do garbage
and the other girl with down syndrome would say, I love garbage day! But it was just what
they had to do and like okay so you don’t like garbage but this is our responsibility and we
have to do it and whether you’re having a good day or not this is what you’ll have to do.
And they did a lot of job training stuff and I thought that was really cool too. And this was
all her own planning so she really like influenced how I changed my perceptions about
learning and teaching and just like interacting with students with disabilities. (Participant 8,
Interview)

In this quote the participant goes on to discuss how this teacher was able to be patient with
the clients, but also have expectations of them. In the end, this helped the participant gain a better
understanding of how one can engage in teaching with special needs populations. Again it
appears as if this participant would have taken these strategies and integrated them into her own
professional identity as a teacher or helper, though this is not explicitly stated. Participant 6
discusses the importance of learning from the workers in her setting in numerous ways, as she
did not have as much interaction with her supervisor. In this setting it seems as if the other
workers in the setting became the primary positive role models for professional identity
development, rather than the supervisor:

I learned a lot from not so much my supervisor because I didn’t have has much contact
with her but the staff members that I worked with every day in the office, they were really
good with taking me aside and teaching me things and like they would go out of their way they knew I had no experience so yeah. (Participant 6, Interview)

She describes a few different instances where the women she was working with went outside of the practices she had learned in school and how this helped to deepen her understanding of practice approaches from a feminist perspective. The women served as positive role models in that she accepted and integrated their approaches to practice into her own professional identity.

In this passage the participant describes being surprised by the stance taken by a worker in her practicum setting. From the experience described above she learned that these situations don’t always turn out as expected, and that flexibility with theories and policies need to occur in order to best serve clients. She describes an experience of “dissonance” where she was required to support a woman seeking custody, when she was worried about the woman’s ability to parent. She describes using theory that she learned through the agency to explain this intervention, rather than the theory that she had learned in her education:

Umm I actually went on a…I don’t know what it is called…I went with a staff member and one of the women to the court and she actually experienced abuse not from her boyfriend at the time but the boyfriend’s parents just like that had to do with her child and stuff and like they wanted to see the child more. So she came to the shelter and left without notice from the boyfriend so then he wasn’t able to see his kid so he took her to court wanting custody of the child and I had like previous knowledge from a staff member that like this woman had experience with drugs and possibly mental disorder and I remember thinking like this woman maybe shouldn’t have custody of this child and like…I was like kind of
wondering like how the women at the shelter could I don’t know like be on her side but then I remembered about the Feminist theory. Which is about like doing whatever you want…like you let the woman do whatever she wants to do because it’s all about her choice. So that was a really big learning moment for me because like…one of my critical reflections is on this but umm…I lost where I was going…but yeah it was a learning moment because I had no idea that that was going to happen and like just seeing the staff member and how she was helping this woman get custody like I had some dissonance with that. But it ended up having a happy ending and yeah… (Participant 6, Interview)

At the end of her interview, participant 6 discussed how she will integrate what she learned from observing crisis work with women into her future practice as a marriage and family counsellor, by integrating feminist theory into her work. This participant reports having learned about her professional values and approach to practice through conversations and observations with other workers. One way in which the workers acted as negative role models for her was in the realm of self-care. Over time she began to feel that the workers were not receiving enough emotional support or engaging in self-care activities, and so she began to research this subject and engage in as much self-care as possible.

Another common way in which workers other than supervisors became positive and negative role models for participants was in their interactions with professionals of other disciplines. One example was a participant who had to contact the police about a missing person. She described that the police were very difficult to deal with because they were operating on a different set of policies, and with different goals. This was a frustrating experience for the participant who really just wanted to help the client and felt that the police were not co-operating (Participant 2, Interview). In another example, the individual feels frustrated for the client due to
the lack of assistance other agencies are providing to them in the community. (Participant 3, Interview)

In summary, practicum provided a rich context of positive and negative role models who assisted in the process of professional identity development through the acceptance or rejection of various observed values, theories, and approaches. Participants learned how various individuals operate within fields, and the ways in which they are both successful and limited in their approaches. They compared these approaches, beliefs and ideas with their personal values in order to begin to consider their professional future in terms of settings, professions, values and approaches.

Overall, the development of relationships and social interactions in practicum seemed to be an important process that allowed participants in the study to explore their professional values and identity. Participants were able to move towards critical consciousness through the process of stories and conversations, and through building relationships with others (including both workers and clients) in practicum. They were able to develop aspects of their professional identity through their exposure to various individuals and situations that caused them to explore their own values in relation to the experiences. Other professionals in the field including but not limited to supervisors acted as positive and negative role models to move towards the development of a professional identity for participants.

**Chapter 4: Discussion**

The purpose of this investigation was to examine student experiences with the process of critical self-reflection in the courses in focus and to gain a deeper understanding of student experiences within their practicum overall. The data consisted of participants’ written critical
self-reflections from the course as well as individual interviews, and thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Students discussed practicum as an experience which lead to a greater understanding of themselves and their future place in human service work. They indicated that they had transformative learning experiences through their relationships and interactions in practicum, which in partnership with written critical reflection led to the development of critical consciousness and an emerging professional identity. The results of this study indicate that transformative learning and professional identity development in practicum are both relational processes, in that they are dependent upon the learner interacting with others in the human service setting. Conversations, stories and relationships with others in the practicum setting appear to promote reflection which in turn leads to critical consciousness. For the students in this study, transformative learning occurs through informal, relational experiences with others in practicum rather than through other aspects of practicum (such as theories, policies, setting etc.). These interactions also informed professional identity as students learned about themselves on a personal and professional level.

Overall, the results of this study suggest that the courses in focus is an important part of professional development for students in that it provides essential learning experiences. The course seems to provide a unique relational source of learning for students at this point in their undergraduate careers in that it helps them understand individuals and systems involved in human service work. The results also suggest that relationships and interactions in practicum provide the experiences needed for critical self-reflection and transformative learning.
The Role of Practicum in Developing Critical Consciousness

Participants discussed practicum as being a valuable contribution to their understanding of people, situations and careers within human service work. Participants described having numerous moments of discomfort or surprise (disorienting dilemmas) which led to critical reflection and ultimately more holistic understandings of the work they were doing and the individuals with whom they worked. Through conversations with their clients they learned a great deal about the complexity and diversity of individual experience with a particular issue or disorder. They also learned about the capacity and resilience of various marginalized populations, especially individuals with mental health concerns, and those who have had adverse life experiences. These learnings are consistent with the development of “critical consciousness” which involves: “the development of critical awareness of personal dynamics in social and political situations” (Freire, 1973), in that students became aware (through stories, interactions, and relationships) of how the personal is political. Through experiences in practicum, participants seemed to learn how life experience and social position play a role in future experiences and outcomes. This learning experience could be understood as students beginning to develop critical consciousness. Transformative learning experiences, however, seemed to be rooted in experiences in the setting itself rather than in the critical self-reflection assignments.

Stories and conversations as learning tools. One of the major themes discussed was that of the importance of stories and narratives for transformative learning in practicum. Participants identified that it was through stories and conversations that they developed more complex and nuanced views of the populations with whom they were working. According to participants, stories and conversations also seemed to humanize people with various labels and identities and to reduce judgemental and stereotypical attitudes. This change in the way
individuals saw people was most significant in regards to new understandings of individuals with mental health diagnoses.

Some of the students interviewed indicated that they had a deficit-based understanding of marginalized individuals prior to taking the practicum course. In a few cases students indicated that their limited view may be rooted in a lack of direct exposure to individuals who have been assigned various stigmatizing labels. This study did not examine curriculum; therefore comments cannot be made on what curriculum is available to students, or what methods of learning are available around marginalized groups before third year practicum. Students suggested that they are not gaining a holistic understanding of mental health issues within their first few years of study. A holistic view may be presented to students, but they do not seem to be internalizing this view. A few participants indicated that they had only read about mental health issues or learned about pathology, rather than interacting with and hearing stories from individuals with mental health issues. One participant suggested that mainly reading about illness and pathology led her to underestimate the capacity of individuals with mental health issues and other differences. One participant indicated was similarly surprised by the capacity and resilience of women in a shelter for women who have experienced domestic violence.

The new understandings that participants developed through practicum points to the value of practicum as a learning tool. It is suggested that the different format and context leads to different kinds of learning. The change in understanding described by students also illuminates a need for examining curriculum presented before the practicum course in the program in focus. It may be the case that more diversified types and contexts for learning for students before they reach their third year practicum would be beneficial in helping develop this holistic understanding before third-year practicum. Based on the evidence presented, possible formats to
consider would be taking the learning outside of the classroom and into the community, where students may interact with individuals with lived experience. It may also be helpful to use more narratives rather than traditional textbooks to encourage transformative learning, as stories are described as an important tool for reflection and learning.

The idea of using stories to teach ethical understandings is consistent with the concept of “narrative pedagogy” (Nursing: Nehls, 1995; Teacher Education: Carter, 1993; Social Work: Noble 2001). Narrative pedagogy can be understood as an method of education that is interpretive in nature. (Nehls, 1995). One article presented by Weisburg & Duffin (1995) describes an interdisciplinary course aimed at teaching professional ethics in which doctors, nurses and lawyers explore professional meeting through the examination of literature and sharing of stories about their professions. The authors describe narratives as a way for students to explore ethical issues within their fields of work.

One interesting method suggested by Weisburg & Duffin (1995) is the practice of journaling throughout the course in response to what is coming up for students when they are presented with these stories. This process is similar to the field notes activity in the courses in focus. The authors suggest that this approach allows for students to explore multiple thoughts or ideas rather than having to conclude on one as is done in a more traditional paper. It may be the case that the informal field notes taken in response to various narratives presented at practicum are more effective in allowing students to engage in critical self-reflection in ethically complex issues.
The Relational Nature of Professional Identity Development

**Storytelling as a process for professional identity development in practicum.** Critical self-reflection can also be viewed as an opportunity to engage in professional identity development. Human beings think of themselves in terms of stories (Bruner, 1990). McAdams (1996) explains that “A life story is an internalized and evolving narrative of the self that incorporates the reconstructed past, perceived present, and anticipated future” (p. 307). In this way identity is created through life stories by making meaning out of life events and morally categorizing them (p. 307). People make meaning of their lives and their personal identities through storytelling. As a result, narrative has emerged as a way to study the self and identity development.

Riessman (2008) explains stories can provide a method for examining individual identities since identity can be constructed through the process of storytelling. McAdams (1993) describes personal stories as “providing unity and purpose” to an individual’s life (p. 20). Beyond this, narratives can also provide examples of how individual identity intersects with cultural narratives and identity (Hammack, 2011; Hammack & Cohler, 2009; Riessman, 2008). Narratives or stories (such as those written critical self-reflections and those which are told in follow-up interviews) have been used in identity development research (McLean, 2005; McLean, Pasupathi & Pals, 2007; McLean & Breen, 2009; McLean, Breen & Fournier, 2010). The results of this study suggest that narratives such as critical self-reflections and other narratives with which individuals interact in practicum may provide a meaning-making process in terms of professional identity development.
In one study exploring self-reflection in human service work, Noble (2001) had fourth-year social work students write first-person stories exploring practicum experiences. Noble explains that this process allows students to provide “a sense of continuity and coherence to their learning process as they become both the subject and object of their own experiences” (p. 355). In this way, stories and conversations could be useful tools in terms of both understanding the experiences of others as well as one’s own experience within human service work. In the same way that stories and conversations can lead to increased awareness of others, they may also be a useful tool in terms of exploring one’s own identity and experience and leading to a deeper awareness of the self as an emerging human service professional.

Since the collection of data for this paper, a narrative assignment has been introduced to practicum courses in focus; the results of this study lend legitimacy to this change. A narrative approach to assignments may be a useful pedagogical method to consider applying within the context of similar practicum courses. This approach may provide support to students who are exploring ethically complex issues that arise in practicum and professional identity within human service work. Based on the results of this study a narrative approach also may be helpful in interdisciplinary practicum courses in that sharing written narratives could provide an opportunities for students to learn from the experiences of others who may be placed in different settings.

**Role models and identity development.** Another series of interactions which influence professional development during practicum are those between students and potential role models in practicum. As practicum can be considered part of the beginning phase of the career socialization process (Gibson, 2003), individuals in practicum may use total or partial role models in the process of professional identity development (Singh, Viannacombe & James,
From a social learning theory perspective, the use of role models occurs because students examine the behaviour of others in similar situations and making their own decisions about what behaviours or qualities may be desirable or undesirable (Singh, et. al., 2006). By viewing individuals at practicum as potential role models, students may closely observe the traits, values and behaviours of these individuals. Students in practicum may evaluate these values and behaviours as positive or negative that they may choose to identify with or not identify with (Gibson, 2003; Lockwood, Jordan and Kunda, 2002; Singh, et al., 2006). This can help young professionals move toward creating professional identities of their own, in that they can choose to integrate certain beliefs or behaviours that they find favourable, and rule out or reject those that they do not find favourable.

Gibson, 2003 defines role models in the following way:

Person(s) an individual perceives to be similar to some extent, and because of that similarity, the individual desires to emulate (or specifically avoid) aspects of that person's attributes or behaviors. Individuals attend to role models as possible exemplars of the professional skills and personal attributes needed to achieve desired goals. (p. 592)

As described above, when individuals are looking for complete or partial role models, they tend to look for individuals who are “similar” to emulate. Identification theory explains that individuals may choose role models that they feel an emotional connection with due to similarities (Gibson, 2003). Therefore, not only might they choose individuals with similar jobs to those they desire, but they may also choose individuals with similar backgrounds as role models. In their study of women in leadership roles, Singh and colleagues (2006) note that finding similar role models can be more difficult for individuals from minority groups such as
women. Personal differences such as gender do, however, still play an important role in role model selection (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). This is because according to Singh and colleagues, individuals must pick similar role models in order to assist with reconciling differences between personal and career goals. Cohen-Scali (2003) agrees that gender and other personal qualities such as personal values influence professional choices in general. In other words professional identity is first developed “in relation to other identities”. Cohen-Scali also adds that one’s chosen field of study can have an influence on values, as one must progressively assimilate one’s values to those of the field in order to find satisfaction in that field. Overall, professional identity is closely linked to social identity. Specifically, Cohen-Scali describes professional identity in the following way:

…not only constitutes an identity at work but also and more importantly a projection of oneself in the future, the anticipation of a career path and the implementation of a work-based logic, or even better a training orientated logic. (p. 121)

Overall, the effect of role models and other can have a large impact on identity development. This is because context and social milieu (including the influence of role models) can actually impact and change the values and behaviours of the student in order to assimilate to the lifestyle, values or expectations of one’s chosen profession (Cohen-Scali, 2003). As described in the literature review, when young people have professional experiences that do not fit their current understanding of the profession, it can disturb their current representation of self (Cohen-Scali, 2003). Consistent with this research, the results of this study indicate that some experiences with role models or other aspects of practicum did create new understandings for
students in terms of their professional identity. These can be positive, as with the participant who felt her supervisor was excellent with behaviour management or negative as with the participant who was concerned with the cynicism presented by her supervisor.

Practicum can be thought of as a “progressive socialization by work” (Cohen-Scali, 2003, p. 245) experience in that the socialization to work is progressive rather than immediate, and it is designed intentionally for the purpose of assisting a young person in integrating into work life. Cohen-Scali (2003) describes these experiences as being more focused on the integration of behaviours and values with the work place than on gaining new skills. As such, experiences such as practicum are important for professional identity development. Ultimately, individuals move towards integration as their workplace helps provide legitimization for “certain knowledge, attitudes, and practices as the norm” (Webster-Wright, 2009, p. 723).

The benefits and risks of the work socialization process in relation to practicum.
Reconciling personal beliefs and experiences with professional demands was a key issue for students in the practicum course. It is clear that issues such as gender, personal value systems and personal mental health can play an important role in the experience of integrating the personal and professional. As described in the theme ‘The relational nature of human service practicums leads to personal and professional identity development’, some participants struggled to integrate personal and professional identities and demands observed within practicum. During these times of discomfort, students or young professionals may look to the behaviour and values of role models for possible approaches and solutions.

As identified above, individuals attempt to move towards a place of integration of personal and professional values in order to develop a professional identity. As described in the results of this study, young professionals completing practicum courses are exposed to numerous
ethical issues and struggles and are attempting to develop their own positions on these. In the results of theme 2, some participants were described as having accepted certain realities of the human service field, while others had chosen to reject certain practices or approaches. This is important because some students are struggling with their own marginalization such as the overwhelming expectations. For example participants mentioned struggling with expectations placed on modern women in both personal and professional realms, or the expectation that individuals in human service work are always mentally healthy. In this way, the career socialization process may serve to reinforce the marginalization of certain groups, as young professionals look to existing approaches which may be rooted in existing forms of oppression within human service work.

The concept of work-life balance is a common phrase that is often heard in reference to the challenges of integrating the demands of work and other realms of life. This notion may be an oversimplification of the reality of the challenges associated when it comes to balancing work and life. As the results of this paper indicate, balancing work and life is a not just a matter of scheduling, but also constitutes balancing values, priorities and multiple identities. This is the challenge that students are discussing. This becomes even more complex in the face of various subjective experiences such as that of being a woman or an individual with mental health concerns in a helping profession. That is because there is a danger of being socialized into the status quo.

This is important in light of the fact that Webster-Wright (2009) indicates that the professional development literature contains an implicit assumption that the young professional is lacking in knowledge and needs to learn and grow from professional development activities and processes. This is problematic in that it assumes that the current orientation of the young
professional is incorrect and needs to be corrected by the place of work. Billet (2006) explain that workplace culture can discourage critical thinking in that it may encourage young learners to take on the status quo, or align professional identities with the goals of the workplace (Garrick & Usher, 2000).

While critical reflection helps students to critically analyze that which they are encountering in the field, it is still important to consider the influence of context on professional development (Webster-Wright, 2009). It is important that young people in practicum understand the ways in which their setting is influencing their developing professional self. For those individuals in the program of focus for this study, this may be the only practicum experience that they have within the undergraduate experience. Therefore, a great deal of responsibility is being placed on the supervisor and setting for their role in developing professional identities and standards, as well as understandings of various professional roles within society and understandings of client populations. Webster-Wright (2009) suggests that more awareness of current discourses in practice is needed in order to create a disruption of these within the context of critical self-reflection.

Based on the results of this study, it is clear that practicum is a setting which has a significant influence on professional identity development. This means that the way in which personal and professional identities are managed by others in the setting may have a significant impact on the way individuals choose to handle various circumstances. These learning also includes the concept of self-care. Mama (2001) suggests that little attention is given to the safety as well as self-care of practicum students. Barlow & Hall (2007) indicate that the nature of the practicum setting as well as openness and professionalism of supervisors can affect quality of
experience for some students, mainly in the realm of being able to express feelings and reactions around observations.

Barlow & Hall (2007) suggest that while a great deal of attention and support is given to the cognitive experiences of practicum, not enough attention is given to the difficult emotional experiences that students have in these settings. While this study did not ask about student feelings, there were some results that suggested that students were struggling either with experiences with their supervisor, or something they were exposed to in practicum. If students do not learn these practices at a time when they are developing their professional identity, it may be too late for individuals to take these things into account. Ultimately, attention to context is imperative in a situation where this practicum experience could be the first professional experience for students. This is because the context will influence the students’ professional expectations (Boud, 1999).

A practicum student may attempt to assimilate to the learning environment, despite various problems that may occur there. While reflection is meant to provide insight into this, it can be difficult when teachers are not aware of context, or when they come from a similar context and may not be aware of their own biases in terms of professional expectations. Context could be acknowledged in terms of explicitly teaching about “the learning milieu” (Boud & Walker, 1998). In other words, teaching students to take into account these factors and to understand them more explicitly may help students to contextualize what they are learning. While some teachers may already integrate some of these concepts informally, it was not formally integrated into the curriculum of the course at the time of the study.
Another important issue to consider is the variety of placements available to third year practicum students. Boud & Walker (1998) suggest that the setting or broader context is the most important mediator in terms of reflection and learning. It is evident from the responses in this study that students feel some learning cannot come from reading about a group or a diagnosis, but that it must occur through interaction with others. This is important to consider because students are placed in varied settings, and therefore interact with different populations when they are in practicum. In order to experience the learning and critical consciousness described the results of this study, it seems possible that students must interact with individuals who are marginalized in some way. Most of the participants in this study were placed with marginalized populations. Third year students in the child-focused stream of the program in focus are frequently placed in mainstream classrooms. This means they could be less likely to interact with more diverse or marginalized populations, than are the individuals placed in the settings such as those described in this study (i.e., alternative schools, shelters and mental health settings). In this way, the type of learning prompted by exposure to marginalized groups that was described by participants in this study may not exist for many other students in third year practicum who are placed in a mainstream classroom.

Limitations

This study encountered a few limitations. First, the sample size was fairly small, and consisted mostly of students that were familiar with me (the researcher) as their Teaching Assistant; only one student did not know me. This subgroup may not have been completely representative of the population of students who have recently taken the courses in focus in that students who had a teaching assistant other than myself, may have had a different experience in the course. I would also be less aware of their practicum experience, which may change the
quality of their interviews. In examining the pool of eligible students, however, most of the eligible population did were in a class where I was the teaching assistant, and so this was not a skewed representation for this particular cohort.

Another limitation is that while the study had attempted to focus on the experience in third year practicum, most participants had also taken a fourth year practicum course at the time of the study. It turned out to be extremely difficult to find participants who had completed third year practicum, but had not participated in fourth. As such, often a comparative perspective came out wherein students would be comparing aspects of the two practicums rather than focusing exclusively on third year. This comparison was very helpful in that they had more than one experience to draw from and it helped them to identify issues that were unique to them and issues that were unique to a particular setting or supervisor. Having two years of practicum also allowed participants to discuss experiences of growth and development. Finally, participants were able to identify the ways in which they grew in terms of their use of critical self-reflection. This was also an issue, however, as the experiences in fourth year may have confounded perceptions of third year. Fourth year was also more salient because it was more recent.

The participants that were interviewed may have had other relevant learning and growth since the time of their third year practicum. Some were being interviewed a year after their practicum was over and so many of them had moved on to new academic and professional endeavours and had participated in other professional development opportunities. They may have graduated from university and/or had other relevant work experiences. When they made comparisons between third and fourth-year or when they talked about how they viewed things now compared to then, it was evident that many experiences must have contributed to these
changes in view. Therefore, it is difficult to attribute any learning or growth to the practicum experience in focus.

This study did not directly address critical consciousness in the interviews, as students in the courses in focus are not made familiar with this term. As a result, students were not specifically asked what aspects of practicum did contribute to their critical consciousness, and therefore (in the results) assumptions were made about what critical consciousness is, based on definitions presented in the literature review.

**Implications and Future Directions**

**Navigating professional issues.** Some participants stated that they were surprised by the extent to which they struggled with issues in practicum including: dealing with the setting, supervisors, other employees, and individuals from other agencies. Some students expressed not only being surprised and frustrated by these issues but also not feeling equipped to navigate them. This study did not investigate what professional development curriculum is presented in the programs in focus; however, the results of this study indicated that participants struggled to navigate professional issues common to the field, such as lack of availability of supervision. It may be helpful for students in the programs in focus to receive more professional training before entering practicum, or more feedback focused on these issues throughout. Future research could examine what material is presented to students in the programs in focus in terms of navigating professional development issues.

**Supervisor.** The supervisor was consistently identified as being one of the most important contributors to the quality of the practicum experience. All participants mentioned the importance of a supervisor in one way or another. Many said that they needed a supervisor who
was present and involved in what they were doing. This was important because it allowed for more learning and feedback in the learning process. It also allowed students to feel secure and comfortable. Furthermore, supervisors were also presented as important role models in professional development and so supervisors were also important in terms of how they navigated personal and professional issues.

Due to the fact that supervision in the field is not always as readily available as students would like, it is possible that students might benefit from more support from the program in terms of professional development. They might also benefit from “lunch and learns”, clinics and workshops provided by the university as an alternative opportunity to polish these skills. Specialized training may also benefit these individuals.

**Teaching methods and assignments.** It is clear from the results of this study that students learn a great deal from the relational aspects of their practicum experience. Participants learn about the diversity and complexity of subjective experiences and this helps them develop towards becoming critically conscious professionals. The stories that students hear from the individuals they meet in practicum appear to promote learning and reflection. As a result, it is recommended that true stories that highlight the unique and complex experiences of marginalized individuals be more integrated into the practicum course and curriculum as a whole.

It may be effective to more heavily integrate assignments that involve storytelling or written narratives as a way for students to reflect on their experiences in their setting. If students were to share stories with one another, they may have the opportunity to learn about numerous settings and populations, including the ones they were not exposed to in their practicum. As
previously mentioned some courses already provide an opportunity for storytelling, and since the collection of data for this study, a few professors in the program in focus have integrated a storytelling assignment into the syllabus for these courses.

Overall, this study highlighted the importance of relational methods of learning for the development of critical consciousness in practicum students entering the human service field. Based on this result, it is recommended that programs providing academic and applied training in human service fields integrate relational forms of learning (storytelling, information conversations, interacting with individuals with lived experience, learning outside of the classroom) as much as possible. This would help students gain diverse experiences in applied settings in order to facilitate the development of critical consciousness and provide a healthy foundation for professional identity development.

**Implications for Research.** In their examinations of the literature in professional learning, Borko (2004) and Webster-Wright (2009) suggest that learning should be more “holistic” and “situated”. In other words, they suggest that in order to understand the process of learning in a complex environment where a learner is interacting with a context, context needs to be explicitly discussed. This study also echoes the importance of including context, as a greater exploration of the practicum course and curriculum as a whole and what is taught in other courses would enrich these findings. The findings would also be enriched by a deeper examination of what is being passed on by practicum supervisors. This study suggests that future research could focus on the content of curriculum, the mode of delivery, and the opportunity for professional learning in other courses within the program in focus. The research presented in this paper suggests a need to ensure that the curriculum provides students with balanced perspectives on various topics such as issues of mental health. Future research should compare learning and
critical consciousness across settings, while taking into account student experiences and subjectivities.

This study also identified important links between narratives and professional development. Future research examining professional identity in relation to subjectivity and narrative identity development would also be a logical extension of this work. While this study indicates that stories heard in placement experiences may significantly contribute to professional identity development, this was not the exact focus of this study. A study examining practicum narratives in relation to professional identity would provide more insight into how professional identity might be influenced by narratives heard and constructed in practicum.
References


Hanisch, Carol, (1970). The personal is political: Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation: Major Writings of Radical Feminists. Radical Feminism. 76-78.


Pepper, J. (2012) Reflective Assignment Two: Critical Reflection [Class Handout]. Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition, University of Guelph, Guelph, ON.


APPENDIX A

UNIVERSITY OF *****

Department of *****

COURSE OUTLINE

Course Instructor: *****

Teaching Assistant: *****

Course Description: In this course, students participate in a supervised practicum arranged in a local school setting. Students will work under the supervision of a faculty member and a school supervisor, have the opportunity to work directly with young people while examining the role of the professional: teacher, special education resource teacher or child and youth counselor. The course provides an important opportunity for students to integrate academic knowledge and practical experience and to develop and extend professional skills. Emphasis is placed on the student’s development as a reflective learner through practicum experiences, developing and fulfilling learning and performance contracts, and constructive feedback.

Course Objectives: By the end of the semester students will:

1. Demonstrate skills in establishing and fulfilling learning and performance contracts in a professional setting.

2. Demonstrate an understanding of the role of the school in the lives of children and youth.

3. Plan, implement and evaluate education/intervention and/or support strategies as directed by the field supervisor that match the developmental level of the individual and small groups of youth.

4. Demonstrate the ability to use information obtained from observations or recorded information about or from youth.

5. Demonstrate the ability to communicate effectively with individuals and small groups of children/youth that reflect an understanding of differing individual abilities and needs.

6. Work effectively in a team with field supervisors and school staff that reflect best practices in the field of education.
7. Demonstrate skills in reflective practice focusing on the relationship between theoretical and applied knowledge and on personal interactions and self-knowledge.

**Student responsibilities: During the placement and the seminars students will:**

1. Develop, in collaboration with the field supervisor, a practicum plan consisting of hours of attendance, on-going responsibilities, weekly planning requirements, and any special projects to be undertaken.

2. Complete a placement orientation checklist and provide a brief presentation on the organization in the seminar group.

3. Set personal goals and evaluate progress.

4. Attend practicum for 12 hours a week having regular interaction with the placement supervisor to monitor and amend activities as needed.

5. Perform in a manner considered appropriate by the placement supervisor and follow school policies, procedures and regulations.

6. Plan, implement and evaluate activities for individual and/or small groups of youth.

7. Attend seminars to discuss and reflect on issues of theory and practice related to placement activities.

8. Complete course requirements including attendance at placement and seminars, field notes, reflective writing, activity plans, and evidence of goal achievement.

9. Meet with field supervisor at mid-term and end of term for a mid-semester and final evaluations.

**COURSE FORMAT**

A. Direct experience with youth – 12 hours per week.

Each student is expected to participate fully in the activities of the program.

B. Seminar/Tutorial – up to 3 hours per week.

Students will spend time during seminar critically reflecting on their experiences as learners and as members of the school community. Time will be spent considering the topics which relate to
practical work with youth, such as issues dealing with establishing and maintaining relationships, effective and respectful communication, program planning and implementation, observations and record keeping, time management, self-evaluation, and working as a member of a professional team. Students will discuss with the course instructor events/issues that have occurred in the placement over the course of the week. Discussing strategies for interventions and problem-solving around issues will be the focus of this time.

**Course Readings and Resources:**

- Course website: CourseLink
- Practicum Manual

**Learning Activities and Evaluation: Detailed descriptions are found in the Practicum Manual and on the course website**

A. Field Placement – 50%

Based on performance of student responsibilities as well as on the midterm and final evaluations.

B. Learning Activities – 50%

i) Fulfillment of Administrative Requirements – 5%

i. Student Profile

ii. Personal Goal Statement

iii. Work/Education Placement Agreement

iv. Practicum Orientation Checklist

v. Midterm and Final Evaluations

ii) Participation in weekly small group discussions in class and on-line - 15%

iii) Field notes & reflective writing – 15%

iv) Culminating Assignment: The Story of My Practicum Experience – 15%

**Personal Disclosure:** Learning is enhanced by exploring the interface between personal/professional experience and academic study (theory, and research). Students are encouraged to explore this
interface and should only reveal as little or as much information as s/he is comfortable sharing with faculty, and fellow students. The evaluation of student performance is not dependant upon student disclosure of private personal information.

In order to create a safe learning environment, students are required to show tolerance for the viewpoints of others. Any abuse, attacks, acts of ridicule, profane language, harassment, etc., online or in the classroom, will not be tolerated.

Academic Integrity: It is the student’s responsibility to ensure that assignments are completed according to the instructions provided by the Instructor. Failure to do so may result in the assignment being rejected or docked marks. Students are also responsible to ensure that they meet University standards for Academic Integrity. Please refer to the following web site on Academic Integrity.

WHEN YOU CANNOT MEET COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

When you find yourself unable to meet a course requirement due to illness or compassionate reasons, please advise the course instructor in writing, with name and e-mail contact. Where possible, this should be done in advance of the missed work or event, but otherwise, just as soon as possible after the due date, and certainly no longer than one week later. Note: if appropriate documentation of your inability to meet that in-course requirement is necessary, the course instructor will request it of you. Such documentation will rarely be required of course components representing 10% of the course grade.
RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD
Certification of Ethical Acceptability of Research Involving Human Participants

APPROVAL PERIOD: November 15, 2012 to November 19, 2013
REB NUMBER: 12SE016
TYPE OF REVIEW: Delegated Type 1
RESPONSIBLE FACULTY: ANDREA BREEN
DEPARTMENT: Family Relations & Applied Nutrition
SPONSOR: N/A

TITLE OF PROJECT: CRITICALLY REFLECTING ON CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTION: AN EXAMINATION OF STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE THIRD YEAR PRACTICUM IN FAMILY RELATIONS AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

The members of the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board have examined the protocol which describes the participation of the human subjects in the above-named research project and considers the procedures, as described by the applicant, to conform to the University’s ethical standards and the Tri-Council Policy Statement.

The REB requires that you adhere to the protocol as last reviewed and approved by the REB. The REB must approve any modifications before they can be implemented. If you wish to modify your research project, please complete the Change Request Form. If there is a change in your source of funding, or a previously unfunded project receives funding, you must report this as a change to the protocol.

Adverse or unexpected events must be reported to the REB as soon as possible with an indication of how these events affect, in the view of the Responsible Faculty, the safety of the participants, and the continuation of the protocol.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and approvals of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research protocols.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored by, at a minimum, a final report and, if the approval period is longer than one year, annual reports. Continued approval is contingent on timely submission of reports.

Membership of the Research Ethics Board: B. Beresford, Ext.; F. Caldwell, Physician; C. Carstairs, COA; S. Chuang, FRAN (alt); K. Cooley, Alt. Health Care; J. Clark, PolSci (alt); J. Devlin, OAC; J. Dwyer, FRAN; M. Dwyer, Legal; D. Dyck, CBS; D. Emslie, Physician (alt); B. Ferguson, CME (alt); H. Gilmour, Legal (alt); J. Goertz, CME; B. Gottlieb, Psychology; B. Giguere, Psychology (alt); S. Henson, OAC (alt); G. Holloway, CBS; L. Kuczynski, Chair; S. McEwen, OVC (alt); J. Minogue, EHS; A. Papadopoulos, OVC; B. Power, Ext.; V. Shalita, SCAN (alt); J. Srebot, CBS (alt); R. Stanfield, SCAN; K. Wendling, Ethics.

Approved:

Date: ____________________________
Appendix C

**Attention previous [course name] students.** Have you participated in the 3rd-year practicum course, [course name] in Fall 2010 or later? Would you like an opportunity to provide feedback and to reflect upon your experiences in the course?

If so, you are invited to participate in a research study, entitled:

**Critically Reflecting on Critical Self-Reflection: An Examination of Students’ Experiences and Professional Development in the Third Year Practicum in Family Relations and Human Development**

**What's involved?**

If you agree to participate will be invited to provide your coursework (or consent to the provision of your coursework) from [course in focus] to the researcher. You will also consent to the release of your grades from the course. You will then be invited to participate in a follow-up interview (it should take about an hour) during which you will be asked to reflect on your experiences in the course.

**Who is eligible?**

To be eligible you must have completed practicum in Fall 2010 or later.

*Please note that participation is NOT open to students who currently have Kristen Cairney as a GTA or Dr. Andrea Breen as a professor.*

This research is being conducted by Kristen Cairney for her Master’s thesis. It is being supervised by Dr. Andrea Breen. Dr. Breen and Kristen’s past students are welcome to participate as long as they do not currently have either of these individuals as instructors and as long as their grades from courses taken with them are finalized.

Attached is a consent form outlining the benefits and risks to participating in the study.

Please contact the student researcher Kristen Cairney ([kcairney@uoguelph.ca](mailto:kcairney@uoguelph.ca)) or Dr. Andrea Breen ([abreen@uoguelph.ca](mailto:abreen@uoguelph.ca)) if you are interested in participating or would like more information about this study.

Regards,

Kristen Cairney and Dr. Andrea Breen
Appendix D

Interview Protocol

Part One

Tell me the story of your (3rd year practicum experience). Please try to include as much detail in this story as you can, including setting, about the other people who were involved, and the most important experiences you had during your practicum. I’ll give you a few minutes to think about this story. When you’re ready please go ahead.

Did any changes happen for you in your practicum in terms of your knowledge or “what you know” relating to the work you were engaging in? Where did they happen? Who was involved? Have you told anyone about this? If so whom? What was your reason for telling? Did you include this incident in your reflective writing? If so why, if not why not?

Can you think of a particularly negative experience from your practicum? (follow up questions as above)

Can you think of a challenge for you in your practicum? (follow up questions as above)

Can you think of a particularly positive experience from your practicum? (follow-up questions as above)

Can you think of a personal success that occurred in practicum? (follow-up questions as above)

Can you describe your experiences with the self-reflection component of the course?

What does self-reflection mean to you? Does it mean something different now than it did before you began practicum? Did your ideas about self-reflection change during practicum? After practicum? If they did change, what aspect of practicum precipitated that change?

What was the process of self-reflection like for you?

Part Two

When you think about yourself in the next 5 years, what are the things you hope for the future?

What do you fear about yourself for the next 5 years?

What is most likely to be true of you in the next 5 years?

What about in terms of your professional self in the future?

When you think about yourself in the next 5 years, what are the things you hope for the future?

What do you fear about the next 5 years?

What is most likely to be true of you in the next 5 years?

Did practicum influence your understanding of your future self, who you’re going to be in the future?
Part Three

Did practicum influence your understanding of yourself in terms of your values and beliefs?

Did practicum influence your understanding of yourself in terms of your future professional identity?

Part Four

Now I’d like to talk a bit about the population you were working with. What population did you work with? Did the experience change your understanding of this population (youth, the elderly, etc.)?

Can you tell me about a specific turning point that occurred in your understanding of others?

Can you tell me about a specific turning point that occurred in your understanding of larger systems, such as the education or child welfare system? (Note: this question will be tailored based on participants’ practicum placement. For example, students placed in schools will be asked about the education system).

If you were to summarize your experience in practicum, what would you say about it?

Is there anything I haven’t asked about that you would like to tell me about your experiences in practicum?

My final question has to do with this interview. Can you tell me a bit about your experience participating? What has this been like for you?
Appendix E

LETTER OF CONSENT for Release of Coursework and Individual Interview

Critically Reflecting on Critical Self-Reflection:

An Examination of Students’ Experiences and Professional Development in the Third Year Practicum in Family Relations and Human Development.

We are conducting research to develop insight into experiences of students in [courses in focus] (3rd Year Practicum in [programs in focus]).

ELIGIBILITY

We are recruiting current or previous University of Guelph students who have participated in [courses in focus] in Fall 2010 or later. This study is being conducted by Dr. Andrea Breen and Kristen Cairney, a graduate student in [courses in focus].

Please note that this study is NOT open to students who currently have Kristen Cairney as a GTA or Dr. Andrea Breen as an instructor.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to examine student’s experiences and learning in [courses in focus]. This research will help to inform curriculum development for the practicum courses. It will also contribute to scholarly knowledge regarding student learning in applied contexts.

PROCEDURES
If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to provide your coursework or consent to the provision of your coursework from [courses in focus] to the researcher. This would include assignments related to the course as well as any notes you have kept from the class. We will also be accessing your grades from this course through the practicum coordinator, Sharon Mayne Devine.

You will then be asked to participate in an interview with Kristen Cairney, a graduate student in [graduate program]. Questions will focus on your experiences and learning in the [courses in focus].

The interview is expected to take approximately one hour. The interview will be audiotaped and transcribed. All interviews will be strictly confidential.

**POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

Because you will be asked about your own experiences and your understanding of yourself it is possible that some participants might feel stress or emotional discomfort when answering these questions. You are free to skip over any question that you are not comfortable answering.

It is important to note that your grades, opportunities or academic status will not be affected by your choice to participate in or withdraw from this study.

**POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR SOCIETY**

Your participation will contribute to the development of practicum course curricula. Participants may experience no direct benefit from participating in this study. However, you may benefit by learning more about the research process. Participants may also enjoy the opportunity to reflect on their experiences relating to practicum.

**COMPENSATION**
There is no financial compensation for participating in this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality of any identifying information that is obtained in connection with this study.

All course materials, audio recordings and transcripts of the interviews will be kept in a locked file cabinet and on a password-protected and encrypted computer. Audio recordings will be made using a voice recorder with encryption and recordings will be downloaded and deleted from the recording device within 24 hours of the interview. Names and contact information will be destroyed within two years after the end of the research project. Your name will not be used in any products (written or electronic) that may result from this study.

It is important to be aware that exceptions to confidentiality occur if a participant reports serious risk to one’s self or others. Situations in which an individual is being abused or neglected or is at risk of harm will be reported to Dr. Andrea Breen and the Research Ethics Board and followed up with the appropriate authorities. For example, information pertaining to harm to a child will be followed-up with the appropriate Child Welfare agency. If a participant reports risk to one’s self or another student at the University of Guelph then the researchers will consult with University of Guelph Counselling Services and/or Health Services as to the appropriate course of action and relevant information that is collected during the study (i.e. nature of risk, identifying information) may be provided to the relevant authorities based on the recommendation from Counselling Services and/or Health Services.

The student researcher, Kristen Cairney is a graduate student in the [graduate program], and the researcher Dr. Andrea Breen is a faculty member. As such, participants must be aware that they may encounter these researchers in future courses. All information you share will be confidential and your participation will not be in any way influence your grades or academic opportunities in future courses.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. **If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.** You may exercise the option of removing your data from the study. You may also decline answering any questions you don’t want to answer and still remain in the study.
RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact:

Research Ethics Coordinator
University of Guelph
437 University Centre
Guelph, ON N1G 2W1
Telephone: (519) 824-4120, ext. 56606
E-mail: sauld@uoguelph.ca
Fax: (519) 821-5236

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact:

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SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

I have read the information provided for the study “Critically Reflecting on Critical Self-Reflection: An Examination of Students’ Experiences and Professional Development in the Third Year Practicum in Family Relations and Human Development” as described herein. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in an individual interview for this study. I have been given a copy of this form.
☐ I give permission for the researchers to use verbatim quotes from the interview in any reports, presentations, or publications associated with the research project Critically Reflecting on Critical Self-Reflection: An examination of students’ experiences and professional development in the third year practicum course.

______________________________________
Name of Participant (please print)

______________________________________  _____________
Signature of Participant                   Date

SIGNATURE OF WITNESS

______________________________________
Name of Witness (please print)

______________________________________  _____________
Signature of Witness                     Date