

Professional Education for Sustainability: Academic Identities in Practice Education

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Professional standards and a strong academic identity are of special value in the area of academic preparation for practice education in a variety of professions such as social care, social work and psychology. It is essential that those who aspire to become professional student educators and supervisors receive the best preparation possible. Establishing the academic identity of a practice educator has remained a troublesome concept as practitioners seek to identify their own role.

This presentation will contribute to the identification and development of the core identity of the social care profession in Ireland. It aims to clarify an appropriate model of supervision in practice education. In 2005 Share and McElwee (2005b: 58) claimed that 'it is crucial to the future of social care in Ireland that practitioners themselves engage seriously with the concept of professionalism and begin to discuss what it might mean'. There is no doubt that professionalization has emerged onto the agenda for policy-makers in the Irish social care field. Much of the debate and discussion on the topic is teleological: it is generally assumed that a) social care practice will 'eventually' become a 'professional' activity and b) that this is a good thing. In a sense the question of 'what is a profession?' has been bracketed and the discussion over 'what type of profession should it be?' has begun to take over. Inevitably, however, the two questions are inextricably linked. The literature has identified a number of barriers to the emergence of professionalisation in social care in Ireland. This has included a lack of professional and academic identity (Farrelly and O'Doherty, 2005: 81).

However, there has been limited progress since 2005. Much is known about the purpose of practice educators, but how their role is implemented is subject to conflicting expectations, partly created by the structure in which they work. Collaboration between practice education settings between universities, institutes of technology and practice provide an opportunity for academia and practice settings to collaborate in a partnership to enhance practice learning and fulfil one of the main aims of the practice educator role in any contemporary setting : to narrow the theory-practice gap. However tensions and conflict will exist.

Perhaps it should not be surprising that the lack of robust and generally agreed articulation of what constitutes professional practice in the first place has resulted in the absence of a body of literature and the development of appropriate academic identity for practice educators in contemporary social care practice in Ireland.