The Knowing of Undergraduate Social Work Students: Understanding Student
Preparedness for Professional Practice

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

The study of social work student preparedness has been top-of-mind for social work researchers and educators. Given the complexities and challenges ascribed to social work practice, the field can place heavy demands and responsibilities on practitioners, warranting a call for the adequate training and preparation of undergraduate social work students as they enter the field. Related discourse has identified concerns pertaining to the preparedness of students and newly trained social workers (Frost et al., 2013; Joubert, 2017; Joubert; 2020; Lymbery, 2009; Moriarty & Manthorpe, 2013; Saitadze & Dvalishvili, 2021; Tham & Lynch, 2014; Tham & Lynch, 2019; Tham & Lynch, 2020; Tham et al., 2023; Welbourne, 2011), the effectiveness of social work curricula (Carter et al., 2018; Damianakis et al., 2020), and the extent and understanding of the field's knowledge base and how it is used (Benner et al., 2019; Lewis & Bolzan, 2007; Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996). I respond to these concerns by examining social work student knowledge and the degree to which engagement with knowledge prepares students for social work practice.

By employing a qualitative methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve undergraduate social work students, nine newly trained social workers, and thirteen faculty, offering a reflective and contextualized account of the development of social work student knowledge and the degree to which engagement with knowledge prepares students for social work practice. Through the theoretical lens of Habermas' theory of knowing – three themes, *practice makes perfect, the pursuit of meaning,* and *know-thy-self* were identified as salient take-aways from the research. These themes illustrate the dynamic connection between learning and doing and the ways in which this connection

helps students develop meaningful and transformative relationships with knowledge. Further, the findings reveal that critical thinking and the development and use of 'self', is an important vehicle for bridging theoretical and practical knowledge as students develop the confidence to employ their disciplinary knowledge in changing contexts and by trusting their intuition in practice settings. These thematic outcomes offer an important contribution to the study of social work student preparedness, particularly as it concerns the ways in which students develop their disciplinary knowledge, the role of social work curricula in this process, and the aspects of 'knowing' which best prepare students for practice. Reflecting on my educational and professional experience in social work, it is my assertion that understanding how students engage with knowledge can enhance social work curricula by identifying elements that foster knowledge transformation and preparedness for practice.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest thanks to the person responsible for getting me here, Dr. Melis Cin. Thank you for your insights, your helpful feedback, and steadfast guidance over these last two years. Your calm reassurance and encouragement cultivated a belief in myself I never thought possible. For you and all you've done, I am so grateful.

To Professor Jo Warin, Dr. Jan McArthur, and Dr. Richard Budd for helping me find my voice as a researcher. To my research participants, who shared their time and entrusted their stories and experiences with me. The production of this thesis would not have transpired without you nor, would I have taken all I have without your thoughtful contributions.

To Kell, Nancy, and Leah who have been my rocks for forever and a day. We have experienced life together and especially over these last few years, you've been my steady hands and key sources of support. Life would not have the same meaning without you, I am thankful for you every day.

To J for the daily check-in's, notes of love, and unyielding reminders that I had the capacity to do this. To Dave for the lifesaving "I'm proud of you" text messages, to Vaness for always having my back, and to Simon for cheering me on from a distance. To Lucy, Claire, Jaxson, McKenna, and Adeline, the chance to spend more time with you has been the greatest motivator. Let this be a reminder that no goal is out of reach. To my Nanny – I miss you every day.

To the first person to think this even possible, my friend and mentor – Dr. Paul Sherman. Like the philosophy you hold nearest to your heart – Soka education, your guidance, support, and mentorship helped me realize my own potential. For me and many others, you helped me find my way – for you and everything you've done, I am forever grateful.

To the person who colours my world. This next chapter is for you and for us – I wouldn't be here without you; I love you.

Author's declaration: I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

Publications derived from PhD course work

Boukydis, O. (2023). The Gray Panther Movement as a Model for Intergenerational Approaches and Late-life Activism. A Critical Cosmopolitan Perspective. *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships, 22*(3), 443-460. https://doi.org/10.1080/15350770.2023.2227615

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Prelude

This research explores student knowledge engagement and preparedness for practice within the context of social work education. This introductory chapter will present the purpose and significance of this research while also providing personal and professional context of the researcher. Following that, the research questions and theoretical framework which guide this study will be presented as will the expected scholarly contributions of this study.

1.2 Purpose and Significance

The responsibilities of social workers are multifaceted as they range from direct service provision, community mobilization and social change efforts. The challenges of today's social climate have placed harsher demands on the social work field (Tham et al., 2023) increasing practitioner stress, burnout, and the normalization of high workloads (Howard et al., 2015; Tham et al., 2023; Rogowski, 2012). These challenges along with the adequate preparation of social workers is noted in the literature as an important area of focus (Frost et al., 2013; Lymbery, 2009; Moriarty & Manthorpe, 2013; Saitadze & Dvalishvili, 2021; Tham & Lynch, 2014; Tham et al., 2023; Welbourne, 2011). This focus has sparked an international conversation of social work student preparedness and the role of social work curricula in preparing students (Carter et al.,2018; Frost et. al., 2013; Joubert, 2020). To date, researchers have investigated the preparedness of newly trained social workers (Grant et al., 2017; McSweeney & Williams, 2019; Saitadze & Dvalishvili, 2021; Tham & Lynch, 2019; Tham & Lynch, 2020), social work students (Carter et al., 2018; Damianakis et al., 2020; Frost et al., 2013; Joubert, 2017; Joubert, 2020; McSweeney & Williams, 2019; Tham & Lynch, 2014) and specific forms of preparedness (Allemang et al., 2021; Carter et al., 2018). To add

to this growing discussion, preparedness is investigated within the context of social work student knowledge and the degree to which engagement with knowledge prepares students for social work practice.

Knowledge engagement speaks to student's relationship with knowledge and the ways in which this relationship cultivates a transformative experience for students. It is posited that knowledge engagement changes the way students see themselves and the value of their knowledge as they locate themselves in their understanding (Ashwin et al., 2012; Ashwin & Komljenovic, 2018). Further, as knowledge engagement transforms and strengthens student understanding of society and all its complexities (Ashwin & Komljenovic, 2018) there is an alignment between student transformation and preparedness as both consider the factors which contribute to developing identities and knowledge. As there are questions pertaining to the effectiveness of social work curricula in terms of preparing social work students (Carter et al., 2018; Damianakis et al.,2020; Frost et al., 2013; Joubert, 2017; Joubert, 2020; Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996; McSweeney & Williams, 2019) this research is positioned to explore the connection between knowledge engagement and preparedness. Specifically, making sense of how students engage with knowledge can enhance social work curricula by identifying elements that foster knowledge transformation and preparedness for practice.

1.3 Research Context

The impetus for this research is reflected by my personal and professional affinity for social work. The lens which I am viewing this research comes from my experience as a social work student, practicing social worker, and as an educator. Like my research participants, I too have navigated the demands and realities of social work degree programs and have reflected and pondered if whether my knowledge would be enough to support my transition to becoming a capable, confident, and knowledgeable social worker. Following my education, I spent nearly ten years working as a social worker in clinical settings and eventually moved to academia where I teach and support students with similar goals. Having spent much of my career building connections between social work and education,

I am vehemently familiar with the demands of social work practice as well as the undergraduate curricula that aims to prepare students for a career in the helping profession. This lived experience has motivated my doctoral pursuits as I am committed and deeply passionate about securing the health and stability of the social work profession, which starts with producing social workers who are confident in their knowledge base. This thesis reflects my long-standing relationship with social work of which I hope to make valuable contributions. The translation of my experience to this study requires a firm methodological framing, which starts with a suitable theoretical framework.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

While social work student preparedness has been explored in various theoretical contexts (Fook et al., 2000; Frost et al., 2013; Joubert, 2017; Joubert, 2020; Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996; Pithouse & Scourfield, 2002; Tham & Lynch, 2014; Tham & Lynch, 2019; Tham & Lynch, 2020; Tham et al., 2023; Watt, 1998) an underexplored application is Jurgen Habermas' theory of knowing. Habermas posits that human knowledge is comprised of three forms of knowing, *empirical-analytic, hermeneutic, and critical/self-reflective* (Habermas, 1966; Habermas, 1971; Habermas, 1973; Habermas, 2004). As a framework, these interests are useful for the examination of the knowledge building process as Habermas viewed knowledge as a cumulative process whereby each form of knowledge forms the basis for the next and captures a fuller range of development (Lovat, 2013; Terry, 1997). This is relevant to this research because to have a full range of development aligns with what is important to social work training, which is achieving a more balanced approach in the way students are taught. To expand, for preparedness to be realized social work students should comfortably understand the theories and skills which guide direct field practice (Heinonen & Spearman, 2010), aligning with empirical and hermeneutic knowledge. Additionally, having the confidence to think critically and engage in self-reflection is the facilitator of social change (Beddoe, 2019) and is captured by the critical/self-reflective function within Habermasian theory.

The suitability of this theory is reflected in educational research having been applied to curriculum, compatibility with value-based education (Lovat & Smith, 2003; Lovat, 2013; Tan & Hairon, 2008) and the examination of educational structures (Terry, 1997). Moreover, Habermas appeals to social work researchers as his theory of ethical communication (Houston et al., 2009), communicative dialogue and action (Lyons & Lovelock, 2004) the lifeworld (Bryson, 2019), and critical realism (Dore, 2019) have been variously applied in social work contexts. While Habermas has been criticized for his unclear and obtuse approach to knowledge theory (Quong, 2003; Sunstein, 1996), Habermas' cognitive interests provide a sturdy theoretical framework which can be applied to any area of focus (Burrell, 1994; Lovat et al., 2004), including social work knowledge. As the field calls for research which explores the production of social work knowledge (Sodhi & Cohen, 2011), the fundamentals of this theory, its previous application to curricula, and Habermas' familiarity to social work research makes for a suitable theoretical application.

1.5 Research Questions

This study is guided by four research questions which are framed using Habermas' theory of knowing. The primary research question asks **How are undergraduate students prepared to engage in professional practice?** This primary research question will be unpacked using three sub questions which are based on Habermas' cognitive interests, empirical-analytical, hermeneutic, and critical/self-reflective.

How do students come to develop their theoretical knowledge?

The empirical-analytic interest pertains to knowledge that is instrumental, empirical, and causal (Kemmis, 1985; Lovat, 2013). Categorized by Terry (1997) as "knowing that", this function represents the curricular aspect of education because of its affinity for analytical understanding. In the context of this research, the empirical-analytic function is understood as theoretical knowledge which are the theories and concepts that underpin the fundamentals of social work.

Theoretical knowledge are the foundational skills which underpin social work practice (Heinonen & Spearman, 2010) because of its universal application to diverse practice settings, citing its importance to social work curricula and student knowledge.

How do students come to develop their knowledge of practical social work skills?

Hermeneutic knowledge informs practical understanding as it based on interpretation (Habermas, 1971), clear communication (Kemmis, 1985), and places knowledge in context (Terry, 1997). Within this research, hermeneutic knowledge refers to how students interpret experiences faced in practice and their exercise in judgement. In other words, social workers may have theoretical knowledge (empirical-analytical) but understanding appropriate application is a different way of thinking. For example, specific assessments or intervention techniques require interpretation of experiences to identify the appropriate use of strategies. This aligns with the notion of meaning-making which according to Lovat et al., (2004) gives rise to the hermeneutic way of knowing, as it helps to understand underlying dimensions.

How do students come to develop their knowledge of critical self-reflection?

In Habermasian theory, critical/self-reflective knowing is the act of critically engaging with outside perspectives in the pursuit of one's own (Clement et al., 2015; Lovat, 2013; Lovat, 2022). This interest is commonly referred to as emancipatory knowledge (Habermas, 1971; Habermas,1973) because to engage in one's critical and self-reflective way of knowing is to utilize knowledge based on individual merit and confident understanding. Categorized as "knowing why" (Terry, 1997) the critical/self-reflective way of knowing leads to a complete and comprehensive understanding as knowers become autonomous in their thinking (Lovat et al., 2004; Lovat, 2013; Quong, 2003). In social work, critical inquiry and self-reflection motivates ongoing personal reflection and evaluation (Mathias, 2015) making it essential to social work practice and education (Fenton, 2019).

1.6 Contributions

As this research integrates the study of social work student knowledge, preparedness, and knowledge engagement, I hope to make valuable contributions to these three areas of study. This research extends the examination of knowledge engagement by exploring it within the context of social work student preparedness. This pursuit will add to Ashwin's (2014) call for multiple perspectives of knowledge transformation and address what is absent from the discussion of social work student knowledge. To elaborate, while existing research explores specific aspects of social work knowledge and engagement (Campbell, 2012; Estreet et al., 2017; Kaighin & Croft, 2013; Kotera et al., 2021; Morton et al., 2019; Olson, 2008; Wilson & Nochajski, 2016; Witt et al., 2021), absent from the discussion is a deeper understanding of social work knowledge, knowledge-based practices (Ottesen et al., 2020; Sodhi & Cohen, 2011) and the translation and formalization of this knowledge (Benner et al., 2019; Lewis & Bolzan, 2007).

In terms of student preparedness, exploring the degree to which social work curricula prepares students for practice requires an understanding of how students engage with and come to develop their knowledge of social work. This is an important area of focus as an understanding of how students acquire, apply, and develop professional knowledge is limited in the discourse (Joubert, 2017; Wilson & Kelly, 2010) as is the fields understanding of the fears and anxieties experienced by students as they prepare for practice (Joubert, 2020). While the literature is dominated by the examination of specific knowledge areas, notably, theoretical, and practical knowledge, the field needs a broader understanding of how students engage with knowledge and how this engagement supports student transition from knowledge to practice. This gap adds to concerns regarding whether student knowledge it is enough to sustain practice over time (Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996) and requires a better sense of how social work students develop and transfer their knowledge in formal capacities (Benner et al., 2019; Lewis & Bolzan, 2007; Wilson & Kelly, 2010). As such, exploring the acquisition, engagement, and application of social work student knowledge is where this

research hopes to make an original contribution to the study of social work student preparedness.

1.7 Research Significance

The significance of this research lies in its potential contribution to social work curricula. The literature notes that social work curricula should move beyond singular approaches to knowledge acquisition (Ottesen et al., 2020) and promote broader views of knowledge as it has much to offer professional practice (Trevithick, 2008). As knowledge engagement enables students to see themselves in relation to the world and to disciplinary knowledge (Ashwin, 2014), this research can positively contribute to a broader view of knowledge within the curricula. Namely, the field requires a reworking of curricula in the way it emphasizes the interplay between knowledge, skills, and values (O'Connor et al., 2009), while also promoting student critical awareness of the various forms of knowledge (Ottesen et al., 2020). As such, exploring preparedness in terms of knowledge engagement not only provides a unique perspective to the discussion of social work knowledge, but may also identify aspects of social work curricula that should be enhanced to meet student needs and strengthen professional education (Apgar, 2019; Howard et al., 2015; Saitadze & Dvalishvili, 2021).

1.9 Thesis Structure

In eight chapters, this thesis will present the contextual, theoretical, methodological, and thematic journey towards understanding how social work students are prepared for practice through the examination of knowledge engagement. Following this introduction, **chapter two** will provide an overview of the literature in three areas, social work student knowledge, social work student preparedness, and knowledge engagement. The goal of this review is to locate the position of this research by uncovering what is known in the literature, where the gap sits, and the novel contribution of this research. **Chapter three** will present the theoretical framing of this research using Habermas' theory of knowing. This chapter will uncover Habermas' theoretical influences, the three cognitive interests

which frame this study, Habermas' contributions to educational research, and my justification for the application of his work. **Chapter four** will discuss the chosen methods by presenting my approach to data collection, analysis, and details pertaining to the research participants, ethical considerations, and limitations. The findings and discussion sections span **chapter five, six, and seven,** as each chapter will review a single theme in relation to the corresponding cognitive interest within Habermas' theory of knowing. This structure provides a focused presentation of each theme and illustrates how each knowledge form (theoretical, practical, and critical/self-reflection) lays the foundation for a total way of knowing. The final chapter, **chapter eight,** will bring closure to this thesis by revisiting each research question in relation to themes generated and will provide key-take aways in terms of this study's contribution, implications, and final thoughts.

Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide literary context by presenting the literature's understanding of social work knowledge, the development of knowledge, social work student preparedness, and knowledge engagement. By engaging with the literature, the aim of this chapter is to uncover key debates in the field, identify gaps in the literature, while also highlighting my contribution to the study of student knowledge engagement in a social work context. To build foundational context for this literary discussion, this first section will introduce the fundamentals of social work knowledge and the ways in which it is developed.

2.2 An Introduction to Social Work Knowledge

To succinctly conceptualize social work knowledge is complicated as the extent of the field's knowledge base has been an area of debate. A known contributor is the ambiguous nature of social work and challenges with placing concrete parameters around its hallmark features (Parton, 2000). As the field struggles to articulate its defining features (Levin et al., 2015; Taylor & White, 2006; Trevithick, 2008) questions have been raised regarding the field's credibility and whether social work has an effective body of knowledge that is theoretically legitimate and independent (Parton, 2000; Sheppard et al., 2001). Additionally, a feature of this debate is the binary that exists between the field's two primary knowledge areas, theory, and practice. Theory and practice which are sometimes characterized as academe and practice (Sheppard et al., 2000; Sheppard et al., 2001) represent the primary knowledge forms commonly referenced in social work discourse, which will be expanded upon below.

Theoretical Knowledge

In a social work context to have theoretical knowledge is to have knowledge of concepts rooted in theory, validity, and evidence (Sheppard et al., 2000, Sheppard et al., 2001; Sheppard & Ryan, 2003). It is posited that social work theories should "provide an integration of acquired knowledge about the relevant mechanisms of action, and conditions for behavioural and social change" (Lub, 2019, p. 5). While the value, purpose, and application of theory in social work practice is contested, particularly among social work students, its application is crucial for engaging in critical and reflective practice (Teater, 2011). To have competency in the application of theory is to be knowledgeable of the theory itself, knowledgeable when making informed decisions and when interpreting complex situations. While students should have the ability to distinguish between various forms of knowledge (Ottesen et al., 2020), theory is misunderstood in practice (Fisher & Somerton, 2000) as perceptions of theory vary as does its clear place in practice (Joubert, 2017). While it has been established that students and newly trained social workers face challenges with theoretical application (Frost et al.,

2013; Lewis & Bolzan, 2007; Wilson & Kelly, 2010; Tham et al., 2023), the literature notes a different experience with practical knowledge.

Practical Knowledge

Practical knowledge is oriented towards knowledge that is skill-based, action-oriented, and deliberately used (Trevithick, 2008) There is a tangibility and demonstratable outcome associated with practical knowledge (Trevithick, 2000) as these practical skills are used actively and in direct response to an inquiry, situation, or event. In social work terms and as it applies to this research, examples of practical knowledge include communication techniques, interviewing and counselling skills, treatment planning and therapeutic interventions. Unlike theoretical knowledge, practical knowledge is seemingly easier to define and articulate, strengthening its relationship to social work knowledge and its development. Within the literature, there is a strong and favourable emphasis on practical knowledge in terms of value and contribution to preparedness (Joubert, 2020; Tham & Lynch, 2014; Tham & Lynch 2019) complementing the field's reputation for being a practice profession 'and its dominant presence in social work literature (Bogo, 2015).

2.3 The Development of Social Work Student Knowledge

Theoretical Knowledge Development

With respect to knowledge development, the literature identifies noteworthy differences in the way students respond to theoretical and practical knowledge. Newly trained social workers face challenges with theory application which is presumably connected to the way they developed their knowledge as students. The development of theoretical knowledge was addressed by Wilson and Kelly (2010) whose research examined how to prepare social work students to work within complex environments. Using a mixed-methods research design, the authors collected the perspectives of fifty-five undergraduate social work students in Northern Ireland. Their findings revealed that students struggled with applying and justifying the use of theory to practice situations. In their evaluation, students reported "difficulties with applying theory and what they perceived as a lack of

connectedness between academic teaching and their experience of practice learning" (Wilson & Kelly, 2010, p. 2445). Similar findings emerged from a South African study that explored challenges with theory integration from the perspective of social work students and lecturers in the context of Exit-Level Outcomes (ELO's). This case-study approach interviewed sixteen students and eight lecturers in an undergraduate social work program. The outcomes revealed that students felt overwhelmed by the level of knowledge they were expected to learn, which compromised their understanding of theories used to inform practice tasks (Carelse & Dykes, 2014). The feeling of "over-burdened" was partially attributed to the timing of the learning as participants commented on the "disjuncture between the timing of learning…theory and in practice education" (Carelse & Dykes, 2014, p. 176). This is further substantiated as participants expressed that challenges with theory integration were due to the disconnect between the instructive and content-driven teaching practices of theory and real-world application (Carelse & Dykes, 2014). In other words, the development of theoretical knowledge is impacted by the pedagogical practices used in the academic environment.

The challenges with drawing theoretical connections was also unpacked by Van Bommel and colleagues (2015) who examined the factors that motivate the development of theoretical knowledge among social work students. Akin to Carelse and Dykes' (2014) findings, the authors note a strong connection between student enthusiasm for knowledge and constructivist learning, which is the integration of knowledge, skills, and values in a specific learning context (Van Bommel et al., 2015). The parallels between student enthusiasm and knowledge integration suggests that theoretical knowledge is valued more when used in practice scenarios, reinforcing the documented preferences for practice learning (Domakin, 2015; Teater, 2011).

The notion that theory is best understood through practice is incongruent with the teaching practices which are commonly used to teach theory. These methods tend to be content driven (Carelse & Dykes, 2014), replicative and prescribed (Trevithick, 2008) and emphasize the soundness of theory and logical

arguments through lectures and structured tutorials (Williams et al., 2013). While these teaching methods have their place (Trevithick, 2008; Williams et al., 2013) the literature notes that students engage more actively when situated inside the learning material rather than learning unilaterally (Teater, 2011). This is not to suggest that theoretical knowledge is exclusively taught using "talk-and-chalk" methods but rather, this is to emphasize that learning 'how' to apply knowledge through reality-based training has more value among social work students (Tham & Lynch, 2014; Tham & Lynch, 2019). The view that students respond more positively in circumstances where knowledge is constructed (Van Bommel et al., 2015) as opposed to "mindlessly duplicative" (Trevithick, 2000, p. 1228) may explain the different levels of interest and understanding between theoretical and practical knowledge.

Practical Knowledge Development

Practical knowledge places less emphasis on formal knowledge and centralizes intuition, application, and reflexivity (Sheppard et al., 2000; Sheppard et al., 2001; Sheppard & Ryan, 2003). In social work education, practical knowledge is referred to as practice learning which emphasizes the development of skill and knowledge which are aligned with best practice (Shapton, 2002). While it may seem that this review provides more examples of how social work students develop practical knowledge, this imbalance is in response to the literature base as practice opportunities, particularly field practicums, is the most widely researched aspect of social work education (Bogo et al., 2015).

One example of a highly researched practice area is simulated course instruction where students work with hired actors to practice their skills in simulated and realistic practice scenarios (Carter et al., 2018). Students have reacted positively to simulated instruction (Bogo et al., 2012; Logie et al., 2013) as these exercises are instrumental in the way students shape and develop skills and practical knowledge. Akin to simulated instruction are role play exercises where students simulate practice scenarios amongst themselves. Role play exercises are useful for practicing clinical skill and strengthening student knowledge and

understanding (Allemang et al., 2021). While role play requires fewer resources than simulated instruction, its student-led nature limits opportunities for feedback and authenticity (Carter et al., 2011), which can impact the effectiveness in terms of knowledge development. Outside of the classroom are social work field practicums, which is a widely used approach to the development of practical knowledge.

The value of field education is regularly highlighted in social work research having received more scholarly attention than any other aspect of curricula (Bogo, 2015). This pedagogical method is "universally acknowledged…as a key feature of professional training in many countries (Domakin, 2015, p. 399) as it affords the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge to actual practice (Raskin et al., 2008; Wayne et al., 2015). Furthermore, as field education is a large contributor to the development of practical knowledge, its significance in terms of preparedness is implicit in the recognition of field education. Field practicums promote the application of theory to practice (Bogo, 2015) and motivates the development of practical skill and knowledge (Allemang et al., 2021).

One study explored the benefits of field learning and found students value opportunities to engage in field learning as it is a strong contributor to the development of knowledge in areas including, personal skill, reflective practice, and professionalism (O'Connor et al., 2009). Field learning is a hallmark of social work education and according to Ottesen and colleagues (2020) prepares students to deal with professional challenges through the development of practical knowledge. Practical knowledge or the process of practice learning create opportunities for students to identify and replicate the efforts of professional social workers (Roulston et al., 2018). These findings mirror the work of Zuchowksi and colleagues (2019) who examined student perspectives on the suitability of field education and practice. Professionalism was found to be a strong indicator of professional suitability, as was critical reflection and self-awareness (Zuchowksi et al., 2019). To further examine the impact of practice learning in terms of

knowledge, it is worthwhile to consider in what ways practice provides this opportunity.

Roulston and colleagues (2018) assessed the perspective of 396 undergraduate social work students to understand which learning activities best prepare students for practice. The findings highlight the value of field supervision in practice settings as this relationship fosters critical reflection, supportive and constructive feedback, all of which positively promotes student learning (Roulston et al., 2018). The positive impact supervision has on student learning speaks to the value students ascribe to integration, community, and socialization. When examining the perceived readiness of undergraduate social work students, Joubert (2017) noted that while learning is promoted by field placements, the absence of relational supports while in field placement can negatively impact the learning experience. Specifically, physical, and emotional inaccessibility at placement can lead to isolation, a lack of belonging and feeling shut out of the learning experience (Joubert, 2017). Despite these challenges, Joubert (2017) emphasized the cultivation of resiliency as students came to accept organizational challenges as being part of professional socialization (p. 177) citing a continued benefit of field education. As evidenced by the literature, the impact practice learning has on the development of practical knowledge is well-known. Most notably, research convincingly highlights field educations' role in promoting professional competence and the opportunity for students to perform as social workers (Caspersen & Smeby, 2021).

The Development of Critical Thinking

While theoretical and practical knowledge appear to dominate social work discourse, critical thinking is viewed as essential in educational and professional contexts (Heard et al., 2020). Despite the known value of having critical thinking skills (Moore, 2013) the varying interpretations and competing definitions have made it challenging to operationalize in an educational context (Turner, 2005). However challenging, the Council of Social Work Education views critical thinking as a competency which is "informed by knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive,

and affective processes that include…critical thinking, affective reactions, and exercise of judgement" (CSWE, 2022, p. 6). This definition supports other views that critical thinking is a process of "practical reasoning" (Mathias, 2015, p. 468) which help students understand how to unpack complex situations (Hall et al., 2021), apply knowledge in various contexts (Boryczko, 2022), and learn to critically examine the world around them (Gibbons & Gray, 2004; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005; Tilbury et al., 2010). As critical thinking captures how social workers "ought to think" (Seelig, 1991, p. 21) and make decisions in practice (Mathias, 2015) understanding its role in the development of social work student knowledge and education is crucial.

In recognition of its value, researchers have shown interest in understanding how social work education cultivates critical thinking skills. Verburg (2019) conducted a review study to better understand the effectiveness of different teaching approaches that stimulate critical thinking in social work education. Through a phased process, the author conducted a comparative analysis of six academic articles which found that effective teaching practices require "more" in terms of duration and teaching practices. Specifically, Verburg (2019) recommends that combining teaching methods around dialogue, authentic instruction, mentorship, and individual study help social work students to develop critical thinking skills. Across these categories of instruction, it was determined that the learning environments which simulate critical thinking through methods such as staged learning processes, case study exercises, interactive instruction and service-learning pedagogies create rich learning environments which help students become "better critical thinkers" (Verburg, 2019, p. 888).

The valued use of case studies is also shared by Bastin and Joubert (2021) who present the benefits of having students apply skills to a single case study over a two-day period. This exercise had students practice *report writing skills* on one day and *court skills* on another day using a single case study. This was an impactful approach as students not only developed practical skills through this experiential learning exercise, but the structuring of this assessment promoted

critical thought. Specifically, working on a single case study over a two-day period provided space for critical reflection on the approaches used (Bastin & Joubert, 2021) and show the value of "doing" critical thinking.

The relationship between "doing" and the development of critical thought was also captured by Milner and Wolfer (2014) who investigated the use of decision cases to develop critical thinking skills. As decision cases present issues which are to be solved by learners, it is suggested that this method prepares students to engage in real world problems (Milner & Wolfer, 2014). This study presented the key learning outcomes of graduate level social work students who engaged in a decision case during their final semester. The authors identify that through case study teachings, discussions are guided using various forms of open-ended inquiries which simulates active engagement and collaboration (Milner & Wolfer, 2014). Akin to Verburg's (2019) support of dialogic learning, the case study method helps students find a deeper understanding of practice scenarios and increase their self-awareness as they recognize the complex and unpredictable nature of the social work field (Milner & Wolfer, 2014). Forde and Lynch (2014) also highlight the value of dialogue and collaboration by integrating an experiential community work module among graduate level social work students. Through interactive means, students listen to audio interviews, participate in small group activities, and engage in dialogue which encourages "reflection, discussion, analysis…feedback, professional socialization, and peer learning" (Forde & Lynch, 2014, p. 2089). This module is illustrative of how interaction and more engaged learning opportunities are cultivators of critical thinking as these various modes of engagement build on the other, allowing students to construct new ideas through critical appraisal and reflection. Further, the applied structuring of this module allows students to explore ideas of community work within the context of field placement and diverse practice settings, reinforcing that critical thinking serves as a much-needed mobilizer between theory and practice.

In support of these findings, Coleman and colleagues (2002) studied the use of portfolios to stimulate critical thinking in social work education. This conceptual study examined the use of portfolios in social work education and the ways in which this method cultivates critical thinking skills for social work students. A key tenet of portfolios is its self-directed and reflective nature as portfolios provide an authentic learning experience which are shaped and created with student experience in mind (Coleman et al., 2002). It is the authenticity that connects portfolios to the development of critical thinking as students participate and benefit from the reflection engendered by this process. The authors note that as students draw connections between curriculum and practice and reflect on their development, progress, and experience through the creation of portfolios, students develop critical thinking skills in the process, making portfolios a suitable vehicle (Coleman et al., 2022). In an interesting and unique domain, Lynch (2022) tackles the underexplored use of artwork as a pedagogical strategy. Visual Teaching Strategies (VTS) is a structured process whereby students look at art and in collaboration with a facilitator, engage in a process of meaning making, as students come to see and view things in different ways (Lynch, 2022). Through a conceptual analysis of the literature, Lynch (2022) contends that VTS is in alignment with "social work epistemologies to explore meaning in context and gain deeper insights into knowledge production and discourses in practices" (p. 1654). Further, the author acknowledges the challenging reality that as a profession, social work is "ambiguous and complex" and integrating VTS in earlier parts of social work education can ground students in the development of one's conscious awareness, which in turn, support professional formation. Lynch's contributions (2022) affirm the value of critical inquiry and reflective analysis in the development of social work knowledge, while also highlighting what can be gained when students find meaning in their learning.

While the literature sees the benefit of teaching critical thinking through experiential learning, Boryczko (2022) explored how written tasks contributes to the development of critical thought. In this study, twenty-two critical reflective essays written by postgraduate social work students were analyzed and annotated

within Legitimation Code Theory and used to identify the nature of knowledge practices undertaken by social work students. A salient take-away from the analysis revealed that the demonstration of knowledge practices helps to strengthen critical thinking skills as it connects different forms of knowledge together (Boryczko, 2022). As this study analyzed written work where students reflected on circumstances they've faced in professional settings, Boryczko (2022) notes the value of using reflective assessments in social work education. Reflective learning such as the task analyzed in this study help students practice their critical thinking skills as reflection creates linkages between knowledge and practice (Boryczko, 2022). The value of written reflections is reiterated by Hall and colleagues (2021) whose research examined how social work educators measure critical thinking in their teaching practices. Following the distribution of a cross sectional exploratory survey, the authors identify an agreement among social work educators that reflective and analytical assessments such as reflective papers, journals, and essays promote critical thinking skills (Hall et al., 2021).

Despite lacking a concrete definition (Mathias, 2015) there appears to be a consensus that critical thinking is fundamental to social work (Boryczko, 2022; Coleman et al., 2002; Hall et al., 2021; Milner & Wolfner, 2014). While the literature highlights some methods for teaching critical thinking, educators continue to struggle with developing strategies that adequately measure and assess critical thinking skills (Boryczko, 2022; Verburg, 2019). As such, growing the dialogue around critical thinking (Hall et al., 2021) and identifying more strategies that build critical thinking skills (Milner & Wolfer, 2014) would be of value to the social work discourse.

Thus far, this review has identified that while there are different means for developing theoretical, practical, and critical knowledge in social work education, the transmission of this knowledge is hindered by a dynamic known as the "knowledge-practice gap" (Gray et al., 2017). The knowledge-practice gap is attributed to challenges with knowledge integration in professional practice. Knowledge integration is an area of practice that students and social workers

continue to struggle with (Carelse & Dykes, 2014; Gray et al., 2017; Wilson & Kelly, 2010), despite being described as a key competency in practice. For example, within the Council of Social Work Education, competence is defined as "the ability to integrate and apply social work knowledge, values, and skills, to practice situations in a purposeful, intentional, and professional manner to promote human and community well-being" (CSWE, 2015, p. 6). To view knowledge integration as a key social work competency reinforces the importance of identifying practical means for addressing the knowledge gap and support preparedness for practice.

This research contends that a useful measure of preparedness is the extent of one's disciplinary knowledge and an understanding of how that knowledge is developed. While it's true that considerable research has explored specific aspects of social work knowledge (Campbell, 2012; Estreet et al., 2017; Kaighin & Croft, 2013; Kotera et al., 2021; Morton et al., 2019; Olson, 2008; Wilson & Nochajski, 2016; Witt et al., 2021), particularly the benefits of practice learning, there remains a gap in holistic understanding. Specifically, absent from the discussion is a deeper understanding of social work knowledge, knowledge-based practices, and the ways in which knowledge is acquired and subsequently translated to practice (Benner et al., 2019; Lewis & Bolzan, 2007; Ottesen et al., 2020; Sodhi & Cohen, 2011), which has much to offer the study of social work student preparedness.

2.4 The Study of Social Work Student Preparedness

The study of social work student preparedness is wide-ranging as researchers have explored preparedness of newly trained social workers (Grant et al., 2017; Hunt et al.,2016; McSweeney & Williams, 2019; Saitadze & Dvalishvili, 2021; Tham & Lynch, 2019; Tham & Lynch, 2020), social work students (Carter et al., 2018; Damianakis et al., 2020; Frost et al., 2013; Joubert, 2017; Joubert, 2020; McSweeney & Williams, 2019; Tham & Lynch, 2014) and specific forms of preparedness (Allemang et. al., 2021; Carter et al., 2018). The impetus for this research is in response to growing concerns that students are graduating from their degree programs and entering the social work field without the necessary

knowledge, skills, and expertise (Joubert, 2017; Joubert, 2020; Saitadze & Dvalishvili, 2021). As lack of preparedness has been attributed to the effectiveness of social work education (Agillas, 2010; Howard et al., 2015; Tham et al., 2023) the study of social work student preparedness warrants continued exploration to ensure newly trained social workers are equipped to face the stresses and demands of social work (Tham & Lynch, 2014). The literature has identified factors which disrupt the preparedness among graduating and newly graduated social workers, which have been grouped into three categories, unexpected realities of practice, knowledge application and self-doubt.

Unexpected Realities of Practice

Within the investigation of social work student preparedness, a common finding is the unforeseen demands newly trained social workers navigate as they enter the field. Described as a "reality crash" (Tham & Lynch, 2014) research has identified a disconnect between what students expect to know once they graduate and what is expected of them as they enter the field. This "reality shock" (Jack & Donnellan, 2010, p.309) emerged from the work of Agllias (2010) whose two-part qualitative study examined the experience of transitioning from student to professional social worker in Australia. In this study, newly graduated social workers commented on the unrealistic expectations they had entering the workforce given the breadth and busyness of their responsibilities (Agllias, 2010). The author notes that demanding workloads had a ripple effect on participant's ability to engage in self-reflective practices (Agllias, 2010) despite it being an important part of practice. The breadth of clinical responsibility was also articulated by Tham and colleagues (2023) who conducted a comparative review of social work degree programs across six countries. The review's objective was to identify curricular models that could support the preparedness of social work students while also unpacking factors that impact preparedness. Unexpected factors such as role ambiguity, demanding workloads, and challenging organizational environments were identified as disrupting a smooth transition to practice (Tham et al., 2023). These unforeseen challenges reflect a disconnect between what is

presented in social work curricula and what is reflected in practice. To address these concerns, the authors recommend that the curricula should focus on the formation of professional identities to help safeguard against the pressures of the workforce and to support the transition from student to social worker (Tham et al., 2023).

    To emphasize the importance of emotional management is to suggest that while students do gain knowledge from their degree, greater emphasis needs to be placed on building resiliency so students can manage unforeseen complexities in practice settings. The need to build student's capacity for withstanding real-life practice reinforces the unpredictability that is social work (Hunt et al., 2016) and the ways in which unpredictability translates to a chaotic working environment (Tham & Lynch, 2019). These assertions are congruent with the perspectives shared in the longitudinal study led by Tham and Lynch (2014; 2019; 2020). These studies examined the preparedness of social workers prior to graduation (Tham & Lynch, 2014) and within the first few years of practice (Tham & Lynch, 2019; Tham & Lynch, 2020). A key finding from their third study was that social workers grew frustrated by the constraints to do the job effectively while in practice, leaving some participants feeling disenchanted given the investment put in their education. This degree of disappointment is indicative of the unforeseen realities of practice in terms of resource constraints and organizational challenges, of which participants were not prepared to face. In addition to feeling ill-prepared from a skills perspective, these findings reinforce that students would benefit from more practical skill development. Specifically, participants expressed a greater appreciation for reality-based training which would allow them to feel better equipped to not only tackle the 'unexpected realities' of practice, but do so in environments which are contentious, demanding, and morally challenging (Tham & Lynch, 2020). The notion that newly trained social workers experience a different reality than what they were prepared for in their degree programmes suggest there are elements of knowing which get lost in the transition from student to social worker, making the transition to professional practice challenging.

Knowledge Application as a Barrier to Preparedness

The literature identifies a fragmented relationship between the knowledge acquired in degree programs and the knowledge used in the field (Joubert, 2020). This fragmentation has also been characterized as a "dissonance" between the ideals taught at university and the actuality of practice (Agllias, 2010), with a particular focus on the challenges faced with knowledge application in practice settings. The strained nature of knowledge translation was captured by Joubert (2020) whose mixed method investigation explored the perceived readiness of social work students following their field practicums. A predominant theme that emerged was difficulty with "fitting things together" as students expressed concerns of inadequacy or having what it takes with respect to the particular use of theoretical knowledge in professional practice. The author was clear to highlight that all participants expressed some degree of uncertainty about defining features of theory and how it is to be used in practice (Joubert, 2020) a view similarly found by Frost and colleagues (2013). These authors examined preparedness for practice by comparing the experiences of newly trained practitioners from the United Kingdom, Italy, and Sweden. In their review, the authors found that social workers had difficulty conceptualizing theoretical knowledge and its importance to practice (Frost et al., 2013). The authors note that participants "demonstrated a great deal of ambivalence about theory in their education" (Frost et al., 2013, p. 336) particularly when it came to its tangible use and application to practice.

The uncertain application of theoretical understanding was also identified as a key take-away from the work of Morris and colleagues (2023) whose research engaged with students, faculty, and others familiar with social work education. After engaging with fifty-three stakeholders through focus group research, the authors note a persistent gap between the training of social work students and professional practice, particularly as it concerns the application of knowledge to practice. This too was captured by the second phase of Tham and Lynch's (2019) longitudinal study of newly graduated social workers. In this phase, when reflecting

on the knowledge used in the earlier part of the transition, participants regularly emphasized the knowledge they wish they had during their first year as opposed to knowledge which had been useful (Tham & Lynch, 2019). Considering the unfamiliar realities of practice coupled with challenges with knowledge application, it is reasonable to ascertain that students and newly trained social workers lack confidence in their knowledge base.

Self-Doubt as a Barrier to Preparedness

The early career experiences of social workers have been reported as "disillusioning and painful (Lewis & Bolzan, 2007, p. 143) as newly trained practitioners enter the field lacking confidence in their knowledge. This was identified by a study conducted by De Jager (2013) who examined newly qualified social workers and their sense of preparedness for professional practice. This South African study used participant reflections to identify their sense of preparedness and in doing so, noted a lack of knowledge of relevant legislation, policy, and overall challenges with theoretical, and skill application in different practice settings (De Jager, 2013). Participants commented on a lack of consistency between terminology used in their degree when compared to practice settings which impacted their confidence in understanding (De Jager, 2013). Similarly, in their exploration of barriers to knowledge acquisition among practicing social workers, McCafferty and Taylor (2022) identified a lack of confidence and knowledge among seasoned practitioners in terms of their use of decision-making models and theories. Following their analysis, the authors note that despite rising expectations to use evidenced-based practice decisions, social workers lack confidence in their application of theory, which is partially attributable to social work's "overcrowded theoretical landscape" (McCafferty & Taylor, 2022, p. 98). While this study examined the perspectives of experienced social workers, it highlights a noteworthy barrier to the acquisition and application of theoretical understanding, even by seasoned social workers.

The presence of self-doubt points to a vulnerability amongst newly trained practitioners, particularly when it comes to their knowledge base. As researchers

have recognized a lack in confidence, there is a call for prioritizing aspects of knowing which foster resilience while getting ready for the workforce (Frost et al., 2013; Joubert, 2017; Joubert, 2020; Tham & Lynch, 2019). The literature notes that resilience is realized through personal growth, self-development (Frost et al., 2013) and critical self-reflection (Joubert, 2020), emphasizing the importance of forming professional identities and emotional regulation (Tham et al., 2023). In practical terms, resilience is also fostered when students feel confident in their knowledge. This view was captured by Tham and Lynch (2019) whose experience interviewing newly graduated social workers in Sweden unveiled a connection between confidence and resilience. The authors note that during the transition to professional practice, social workers who worked full-time in organizations where they completed field work prior to graduation, had an easier time transitioning to professional practice. In these instances, practitioners had an idea of what to expect in their work, as opposed to those who had a chaotic and unorganized transitional experience due to unfamiliar environments. This outcome not only illustrates the value of experience and familiarity when transitioning to a professional role, but also stresses the importance of resilience and independence among social workers, offering useful implications to the study of social work student preparedness. For example, the outcome of Frost and colleagues (2013) research found that building resilience can help students as they navigate uncertainties and complexities in practice. This perspective supports Joubert's (2020) assertion that opportunities to explore resilience through the emergence of 'self' should be more prominent in social work curricula.

Social Work Education and Preparedness

As evidenced by the literature, students and newly trained social workers have difficulty translating what is learned in their degree programs and what is

realized in practice. This is supportive of the known view that within social work there is a concerning disconnect between curricula and practice (Frost et al., 2013; Healy & Meagher, 2004; Tham & Lynch, 2014; Wilson & Kelly, 2010). This disconnect has led to criticisms that newly trained social workers lack skills and knowledge for practice (Saitadze & Dvalishvili, 2021) which some have attributed to social work curriculum. To illustrate, some research has questioned the effectiveness of academic programming (Agllias, 2010; Tham et al., 2023), the obscurity of program objectives (Howard et al., 2015) and the lack of curricular consistency.

With respect to theoretical knowledge, some argue that social work curricula tend to prioritize too much theory (Fisher & Somerton, 2000) while other views suggest the underrepresentation of theory leads to misunderstandings of its role in practice (Saitadze & Dvalishvili, 2021). As it concerns practice knowledge, some have suggested that social work education would benefit from more realistic learning opportunities (Tham & Lynch, 2014) such as focused skills days and simulation (Joubert, 2017) while others caution against the over-dependence of field education (Agllias, 2010). It is argued that while field education is social work's signature pedagogy (Bogo, 2015), to much practice de-emphasizes the value of academic learning and the relevance of theory in social work (Sheppard et al., 2000; Sheppard & Ryan, 2003).

These varying positions across the literature adds to the already ambiguous nature of social work (Parton, 2000) and has produced uncertainty for students and social workers as to what exactly constitutes social work knowledge. Reflecting on the literature's position, it is problematic to graduate students from professional degree programs with a reputation for lacking the skills, knowledge, and confidence in their knowledge base. As such, exploring the relationship between social work student knowledge and preparedness for practice is a valuable and yet, underexplored part of the discourse. The specific understanding of how students perceive readiness and acquire, apply, and develop professional

knowledge (Joubert, 2017; Wilson & Kelly, 2010) is limited and is a gap this research intends to fill through the study of knowledge engagement.

2.5 Situating Knowledge Engagement in a Social Work Context

In this research, knowledge engagement is understood as knowledge development and the ways in which students come to understand their discipline. This interpretation is heavily influenced by the work of Ashwin et al., (2012), Ashwin et al., (2014), Ashwin et al., (2016), Ashwin and McVitty (2015) whose examination of knowledge engagement has contributed extensively to research in higher education. In this context, the research emphasizes the relationship between knowledge transformation and engagement in the way students see the value and relevance of their knowledge, develop self-awareness, and experience personal and intellectual engagement with their studies (Ashwin et al., 2012; Ashwin & Komilenovic, 2018). Transformation implies development as students realize a larger perhaps more meaningful and well-informed understanding of themselves, their discipline, and their place in the world. As such, applying Ashwin's characterization of engagement and transformation to knowledge development allows this research to examine development in terms of curriculum, self-identify, and students meaningful and personal relationship to knowledge.

The study of knowledge engagement explores students' relationship with knowledge, the transformation of knowledge, and the role of higher education in fostering said transformation (Ashwin, 2014; Ashwin et al., 2014). Engagement in this context illuminates a reciprocal relationship between students, knowledge and the manner in which knowledge transforms students and the way students transform knowledge (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015). These concepts have been explored in various contexts including, engagement with feminist knowledge (Abbas et al., 2019), undergraduate dissertations (Ashwin et al., 2017), knowledge engagement with chemistry students (Ashwin et al., 2023), and sociology students (Ashwin et al., 2014; Ashwin et al., 2016). Common across this research is that knowledge engagement is central to the transformative opportunities offered in

higher education (Ashwin et al., 2014; Ashwin et al., 2016) and fundamental to the transformation of individual identities.

In one study, changes to students' relationship with disciplinary knowledge were observed following a three-year examination of undergraduate chemistry students. The study observed knowledge transition from external to personal as concepts and ideas related to chemistry went from objective, to contextualized, to personal (Ashwin et al., 2023). From this study, the authors posit that engagement with knowledge enables a transformative experience whereby students come to realize their relationship to knowledge, their contributions to knowledge, and their place in the world (Ashwin et al., 2023). Comparably in earlier work, Ashwin and colleagues (2014) explored knowledge engagement from the perspective of undergraduate sociology students. A change in knowledge is also reflected in this study as the authors note a shift in the way students locate their understanding of sociology in a larger context, and their view of the world. Specifically, the study observed a notable transition from a general understanding of knowledge to one located in the context of their discipline (Ashwin et al., 2014). The authors draw a similar conclusion to the previous study (Ashwin et al., 2022) that knowledge engagement is part and parcel with knowledge transformation. In a way, knowledge engagement is linked to knowledge transformation as engagement broadens students' knowledge in terms of their viewing of themselves, the world, and the discipline they study (Ashwin et al., 2014; Ashwin et al., 2016). In other words, knowledge engagement helps shape a newly developed understanding of self and one's identity (Ashwin et al., 2020), fostering a degree of autonomy and independence in one's disciplinary knowledge. In this vein, situating the study of knowledge engagement in a social work context has much to offer the study of student preparedness as the development of 'self' and professional identities should have a stronger place in social work curricula (Joubert, 2020; Tham et al., 2023).

The study of knowledge engagement responds to the knowledge-practice gap as its focus on self, identify, and transformation cultivates independence and a

personal connection to knowledge. Promoting these aspects of knowledge engagement, particularly independence, would support the transition from the secure student role to an independent role as a practitioner. To expand, the knowledge-practice gap which is filled through knowledge integration is defined in social work terms as "the process of connecting practice experiences encountered in the field with different forms of knowledge" (Maidment, 2022, p. 1820). To have a confident understanding of knowledge integration is especially pertinent to those entering professional practice who will face unforeseen challenges in an evolving and demanding field (Boryczko, 2022). As such, it is necessary for students to acquire knowledge beyond basic comprehension and toward knowledge that can be applied to environments which are "changing, turbulent" (Joubert, 2017, p. 17) and unfamiliar (Apgar, 2019). Given the range of insight the study of knowledge engagement has to offer, exploring preparedness within this context will support the uncovering of how students acquire, translate, and formalize knowledge (Benner et al., 2019; Lewis & Bolzan, 2007).

2.6 Identifying the Gap

This chapter has identified key considerations for this research by addressing what is known across three distinct bodies of research, social work knowledge, student preparedness, and knowledge engagement. As evidenced by this review, it is suggested that social work's knowledge base is dominated by two primary knowledge areas, theoretical and practical knowledge. Additionally, the discourse has identified various pedagogical methods and strategies which support the development of social work student knowledge. While the field has a firm grasp of specific knowledge areas related to social work (Campbell, 2012; Estreet et al., 2017; Kaighin & Croft, 2013; Kotera et al., 2021; Morton et al., 2019; Olson, 2008; Wilson & Nochajski, 2016; Witt et al., 2021), the field is less familiar with the development, application, and translation of social work knowledge (Benner et al., 2019; Joubert, 2017; Lewis & Bolzan, 2007; Wilson & Kelly, 2010). This limited understanding extends to the preparedness of newly trained social workers, particularly as we consider the challenges newly trained social workers

face with unexpected realities of practice (Agllias, 2010; Tham & Lynch, 2014; Tham et al., 2023) knowledge application (Joubert, 2020; Morris et al., 2023), and confidence (Joubert, 2017; Dejager, 2013; Lewis & Bolzan, 2007). The intersection between student knowledge and preparedness reflects the familiar challenges that social workers and students have with knowledge integration (Carelse & Dykes, 2014; Gray et al., 2017; Wilson & Kelly, 2010), indicating that more needs to be known about the disconnect between knowledge, practice and why it exists.

This research will address the knowledge-practice gap (Gray et al., 2017) that impacts students and newly trained social workers through the purview of knowledge engagement. Exploring knowledge engagement within the context of social work student preparedness will respond to the field's limited understanding of how students develop, apply, and transfer professional knowledge (Benner et al., 2019; Joubert, 2017; Lewis & Bolzan, 2007; Wilson & Kelly, 2010) and give new insights for addressing this knowledge-gap. As knowledge engagement speaks to the perceived value and relevance of student knowledge, the development of self-awareness, and the transformation that ensues through engagement with studies (Ashwin & Komilenovic, 2018; Ashwin et al., 2012) there is an opportunity to examine the development of social work knowledge not as a siloed practice, but as a holistic and transformative experience. This position responds to the view that social work curricula should move beyond singular approaches to knowledge acquisition (Ottesen et al., 2020) by viewing the student experience as a journey (Joubert, 2017), and considering the interplay between knowledge, skills, and values (O'Connor et al., 2019).

As knowledge engagement is more centralized on knowledge transformation and broadening one's views towards self and discipline of study (Ashwin et al., 2014; Ashwin et al., 2016; Ashwin et al., 2020), there is an opportunity to further explore the development of 'self' and professional identities which is much needed in social work curricula (Joubert, 2020; Tham et al., 2023). From my extensive review, this conceptualization of knowledge engagement has

yet to be extended to social work discourse and as such, I am not only adding to Ashwin's (2014) call for multiple perspectives but am taking a new approach to the long-debated study of social work student knowledge.

Chapter Three

Theoretical Framework

3.1 Introduction

While the study of social work student knowledge has been explored using a range of theoretical frameworks (Fook et al., 2000; Frost et al., 2013; Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996; Pithouse & Scourfield, 2002; Tham et al., 2023; Watt, 1998) this

research is pursuing the underexplored application of theory of knowing by Jurgen Habermas. While Habermas is quite familiar to educational research, theory of knowing does not have the same scholarly presence in social work discourse. This chapter aims to satisfy any curiosity by engaging in a theoretical exploration of Habermas' theory of knowing while also locating this theory within the development of social work student knowledge. To achieve this, this chapter will discuss the fundamentals of theory of knowing, its application to educational literature and Habermas' relevance to this study. As the purpose of this chapter is to provide a theoretical context for the presenting research, a useful starting point is to explore the earlier influences of Jurgen Habermas.

3.2 Theoretical Influences

Born in 1929 in Dusseldorf Germany, Habermas was raised during a time of division and conflict in post-war Germany. Raised in a Nazi-supporting family, a young Habermas joined Hitler's Youth Compulsorily where he observed the unravelling of the Third Reich (Lovat, 2013) and observed with disappointment the collective destruction of the Nazi period (Finlayson, 2005). These experiences left Habermas having to reconcile a strained relationship between philosophy and politics (Finlayson & Dafydd, 2023) and while difficult, this period was pivotal for Habermas' philosophical development (Lafont, 2008). Namely, these experiences cultivated an intrigue and commitment to promoting action informed by reason, intentional reflection, and reflexivity (Lovat, 2013). When viewed in hindsight the roots of what is theoretically important to Habermas can be traced back to this period in his life (Terry, 1997) as can his academic influences.

After completing his doctoral dissertation at the University of Bonn in 1954, Habermas became a young member of the Frankfurt School, a group of theorists whose views were grounded in neo-Marxist views and critical theory (Lovat, 2013). Habermas' impressions of theorists such as Marx and Freud were shaped by his time working with Theodore Adorno (Pusey, 1987) as was his affinity and appreciation for the use of 'self' in the knowing process. It is noted that Habermas was personally moved by Adorno's experience as a German Jewish intellect as he

adopted a "self-critical spirit" by balancing his familial identity with the awareness of what occurred in post-war Germany (Finlayson, 2005). Additionally, Habermas and Adorno shared concern over the impact that positivism had on the conceptualization of knowledge and believed in the emergence of self-reflexive theory (Cherem, n.d.). This Hegelian-Marxist inspired view (Cherem, n.d.) moved Habermas away from the "dominant positivist philosophy" (Finlayson & Dafydd, 2023) and toward a knowing process based in one's own construction of reality (Lovat, 2013), emancipatory reflection and self-formation (Pusey, 1987). In addition to his Frankfurt contemporaries, Habermas' belief in the relationship between self and knowledge can be attributed to philosophers John Dewey and George Mead.

Dewey's philosophical influence is reflected in the broad agreement that the unity of knowledge (Lovat, 2013) is impelled by reflective inquiry (Shalin, 1992), democratic thinking, and enlightened rationality (Antonio & Kellner, 1992; Zhao, 2014). Whereas the use of 'self' in Habermas' work is linked to the development of self and social symbolic interactions found in Mead's social theory (Corchia, 2019; Hinkle, 1992; Roderick, 1986; Zhao, 2014). While the specific influences of these scholars are referenced more frequently in Habermas' later work (Antonio & Keller, 1992; Corchia, 2019; Zhao, 2014) the anti-positivist and pragmatic ideologies which underpin theory of knowing (Butler, 1997; Lovat, 2013) are indicative of Dewey and Mead's influence. Habermas' pragmatic philosophy is one that recognizes that while there is merit to positivist and objective knowledge, it cannot be taken as the only form of knowledge (Bernstein, 1985). In contrast, knowledge should reflect the human experience (Lovat, 2013) that moves beyond the basic principles of learning (Salim, 2020) and impels pluralistic forms of inquiry (Finlayson & Dafydd, 2023). As posited by Habermas (1971), "what man lives and experiences he must interpret, and thus, evaluate" (p. 292). For its time, theory of knowing uniquely joined the ideas of philosophy and science (Lovat, 2013; Pusey 1987) and advanced a transformative knowing process (Salim, 2020) which

attempted to re-define the relationship between theory and practice (Cherem, n.d.).

To fully appreciate Habermas' place in the knowing debate is to have an awareness of the influences which were pivotal to the formation of his philosophical views. To expand, absent from the years of Nazi-Germany was the opportunity for reason, consensus, and self-compassion and from that experience, Habermas endeavoured to establish a form of knowledge based in reason (Finlayson & Dafydd, 2023). The suppression of freedom experienced during his earlier years (Terry, 1997) and the influence of critical theorists at the Frankfurt School, sharpened his philosophical ideals as Habermas attempted to develop a novel framework for critical social theory. This framework is now understood as theory of knowing which aims to overcome positivism and to prioritize the relationship between knowledge and the world (Cherem, n.d.). At the core of this theory are three categories of knowing commonly referred to as cognitive interests. As the cognitive interests are central to Habermas' theory of knowing, they have a strong presence in this research as part of the theoretical framework. To explore the suitability of theory of knowing as a theoretical framework, the following section will introduce Habermas' cognitive interests and the connection to the development of social work student knowledge.

3.3 Habermas' Cognitive Interests and Social Work Knowledge

Habermas posits that knowledge is generated, revealed, negotiated, and impelled by three cognitive interests known as *empirical analytical, historical hermeneutic*, and *critical self-reflective* (Habermas, 1971; Habermas, 1973; Habermas, 2004; Lovat et al., 2004; Lovat, 2013; Lyons & Lovelock, 2004). As each interest is distinct, the wholeness of knowing is realized through the connectedness of each interest and drives a knowing process that is holistic, comprehensive, and fully dimensional (Salim, 2020). The synergy between these interests is not to minimize the independent function of each interest, but rather highlights the interworking of the human mind, the development of knowledge, and the simultaneous creation and discovery of the world. To effectively capture this

knowing process, the following section will present the unique function of each interest in connection to aspects of social work student knowledge.

Empirical-analytic function (technical interest)

The empirical-analytic function or technical interest is the instrumental and causal way of knowing (Habermas, 1971; Kemmis, 1985; Lovat, 2013). Driven by logic, fact, and empirical understanding (Clement et al., 2015) this interest establishes a baseline of knowledge which is guided by rule centric (Grundy, 1987), predictive (Habermas, 1971) and objective forms of inquiry (Salim, 2020). Born from the field of natural science, this interest commits to the testable, observable, and methodologically controlled ideas which are free from any interpretative mode of inquiry (Finlayson & Dafydd, 2023). Further, it is the notion of control to which the empirical interest is built because to view the world through a technical lens "establishes rules both for the construction of theories and for their critical testing" (Pusey, 1987, p. 24). While there may be an appreciation for empirical knowledge, Habermas did not subscribe to the idea that absolute forms of inquiry were superior to others. This perspective drove Habermas to justify an approach to knowledge that would move beyond the "then dominant positivist philosophy of science" (Finlayson & Dafydd, 2023). As the empirical-analytical function is concerned with prediction and control (Habermas, 1971), it can be understood in social work terms as theoretical knowledge.

To have theoretical understanding of social work concepts is to have knowledge that is rooted in theory, validity, evidence, and rules (Shepperd &Ryan, 2003). While social work is generally viewed as a practice profession, theoretical knowledge is largely acquired through memorization and prescribed application (Trevithick, 2008) and is pertinent to the development of social work student knowledge. Specifically, theory is the vehicle for measuring the ability to integrate theory to practice (Carelse & Dykes, 2014) and to achieve this, social work students should comfortably understand the theoretical frameworks and models that guide professional practice (Heinonen & Spearman, 2010).

Historical-Hermeneutic Function

The historical-hermeneutic function otherwise known as the interpretative or practical interest moves beyond the logic found in the empirical interest. This cognitive interest impels a practical understanding of information (Kemmis, 1985) based on interpretation, contextualization, and deeper meaning (Clement et al., 2015; Habermas, 1971; Lovat, 2022). To have a deeper understanding is to ascribe meaning to knowledge by exploring the broader context of experiences through interaction, interpretation (Grundy, 1987), interrelationships, and engagement (Lovat, 2013). It includes integrating physical and sociocultural influences (Streibel, 1991) to an empirical knowledge base which creates opportunities for knowledge mobilization and action (Grundy, 1987). Such action is initiated using the hermeneutic function as one realizes and exercises personal judgement, (Streibel, 1991) through meaning making (Lovat, 2004) and a deeper pursuit of understanding (Bernstein, 1985). In this view, a deeper understanding is realized through human interaction (Butler, 1997; Lovat, 2004) and through interaction individuals develop a deeper, reflexive, and profound knowledge base. Comparably, important to social work knowledge is its reflexive and interpretative features whereby students should understand how to employ relevant and applicable forms of knowledge (Heinonen & Spearman, 2010), referred to as practice knowledge. Practice knowledge informs how decisions are made through knowledge integration (Taylor & White, 2001) by emphasizing intuition, application, and reflexivity (Sheppard et al., 2000; Sheppard et al., 2001; Sheppard & Ryan, 2003). The use of interpretation is at the core of the hermeneutic interest as this function is guided by intersubjectivity and self-understanding (Alexander, 1991).

Critical/ self-reflective function

The critical/self-reflective function impels an autonomous way of knowing that is reflective, free, and profound (Lovat, 2004). Built on the premise of emancipation, this interest involves critically engaging with other perspectives

which facilitates a transformative process of self (Lovat, 2013; Lovat, 2022) and towards freedom in one's own perspective (Clement et al., 2015). According to Habermas (1973) reaching a level of freedom or emancipation of knowledge is achieved through the truest form of self-reflection. This pursuit cultivates a sense of empowerment as it gives rise to action that is authentic, critically informed, and enables a sense of autonomy of the knower (Grundy, 1987). The weight of this interest is not solely based on one's ability to be free in their knowledge (Lovat, 2022) but also, autonomous thinking promotes a way of knowing that is critically self-reflective towards oneself and their connection to society (Grundy, 1987; Salim, 2020).

In terms of knowledge development, the critical/self-reflective interest is pivotal in the way knowledge is mobilized for the purpose of transformative and practical action (Gray & Lovat, 2008). As this interest impels self-transformation and action, it is rightfully considered to be the "ultimate point of the learning game" (Gray & Lovat, 2008, p. 72) as freedom and emancipation facilitates change and action. As such, this critical/self-reflective interest leads to a complete and comprehensive way of knowing (Lovat et al., 2004; Lovat, 2013; Quong, 2003) that has the capacity to transform knowledge in familiar and unfamiliar contexts (Lovat, 2013).

The critical/self-reflective interest involves being emancipated from the knowing of others and to be free in one's thinking, judgement, and points of view (Lovat, 2013; Lovat, 2022). In this instance, the alignment between critical/self-reflective and social work student knowledge is in the development of confidence, professional intuition, and an overall sense of preparedness. To integrate knowledge is to acquire knowledge beyond basic comprehension and apply it to unfamiliar situations in an evolving field (Apgar, 2019; Boryczko, 2022). As such, students need to engage in a critically informed knowing process that drives autonomy and trust of 'self' because to have confidence in critical and reflective inquiry is what facilitates social change (Beddoe, 2019). At the core of the critical/self-reflective function is the use of 'self' in the knowing process and

because 'self' is an important connector between Habermasian theory and this research, it warrants further explanation.

Self in the 'Knowing' Process

In the Habermasian view, 'self' has a central presence in the development of knowledge as learners transition from reporters of information toward freedom of thought, inquiry, and perspective. This is achieved through awareness of one's moral consciousness (Terry, 1997) as learners interpret theoretical knowledge (empirical analytical) through practical engagement and interpretation of experiences (historical hermeneutic). Further, the critical/self-reflective interest is used as learners develop individual insight and reflexivity (Cherem, n.d.) to which the point of praxis is reached. In doing so, learners move beyond a place of comfort (Lovat, 2022) and become independent knowers guided by their own 'self'. This centralizes 'self' in the development of social work student knowledge because for students to confidently integrate their knowledge in professional practice, then one needs to be free or emancipated in their knowing as professional social workers. This is noteworthy alignment as the analysis of 'self' and reflective practices are seen as core concepts to social work education (Ferguson, 2018) and the study of knowledge engagement.

3.4 Habermas' Theory of Knowing in Educational Literature

Researchers and practitioners who have an interest in adult education have made good use of Habermasian theories as a conceptual framework. For example, Alexandra (1991) applies critical theory and Habermas' cognitive interests to examine the increasing professionalization of adult education in Canada. In their critique, the author presents concerns of the increase in instrumental rationality in terms of the preparation of adult educators. Specifically, Alexandra (1991) notes, "If the professionalization of adult education proceeds in accordance with the application of only scientific standards to its methods, materials and organization, then the field risks the danger of becoming rationalized" (p. 128). In this instance, the literature acknowledges the value of empirical knowledge to the field of natural sciences while also recognizing that

empirical knowledge can limit individual autonomy and self-identity. The value of autonomy and self in the knowing process is further captured in more recent work of Huynh (2005) who utilizes Habermas' cognitive interests as a conceptual foundation for understanding the meaning of e-learning productivity. The utilization of cognitive interests in adult education is seen as beneficial as it welcomes diverse perspectives, interests, and value contexts. Further, the author notes these interests highlight a richer and deeper context when compared to "human knowledge adopted by positivism" (Huynh, 2005, p. 38) which is important to the study of e-learning productivity.

Comparably, the beneficial application of 'self' is captured by Crotty (2010) who employed Habermas' cognitive interests as a theoretical framing in case study research. The author explores the connection between value education and social engagement observed in four student led community projects. Following a series of focus groups and observations, Crotty (2010) used Habermas' cognitive interests as a theoretical backdrop for interpreting the type of knowledge revealed. Akin to the research highlighted previously, Habermas' critical/self-reflective interest had a dominant presence in the research findings. Specifically, this interest was clearly fostered by students and teachers in terms of finding commonalities in difference, leading with pro-social values, and learning how to manage ethically challenging situations in their respective communities (Crotty, 2010). The increased engagement observed in this research supports Habermas' thesis towards emancipatory knowledge in the way self-reflection and critical awareness leads to a kind of knowing that is mobilized to action.

In other empirical focused work, Habermas' cognitive interests have been used as a point of analysis in mixed-methods research in higher education. Through a series of research projects (Clement et al., 2015; Lovat, 2004; Lovat et al., 2004; Lovat et al., 2008;) researchers examined the assessment of research activities in higher education with a focus on the knowing experience in the doctoral examination process. Through a rigorous content analysis of PhD theses and examiner reports, various iterations of this large-scale study have emerged,

with many of them coding the analyzed texts against the backdrop of Habermas' cognitive interests. In terms of focus, some projects centered around the exploration of examiner judgement in the doctoral process (Clement, 2015; Lovat, 2004; Lovat, 2013), the role and influence of doctoral supervisors (Lovat et al., 2003), and the ways in which the educator-learner relationship changes at different points of the learning process (Lovat et al., 2004). Through the appraisal and coded analysis of PhD theses, examiner feedback, and using Habermas' cognitive interests as a conceptual framework, these studies show the usefulness of Habermas' theory as it relates to the influence of types of knowing. In this case, the critical lens offered by Habermas' cognitive interests provided opportunities to identify a complete way of knowing through the labelled distinctions of cognitive interests. As well, from a practical perspective, these findings illuminate an understanding of academic judgements and learning assumptions in higher education and its impact on evaluation and assessment (Clement, 2015; Lovat, 2013).

Common across the literature is evidence that theory of knowing is a valuable theoretical framing that can be used to examine types of knowledge, the knowing process, and opportunities for advancement and change. In these instances, Habermas' cognitive interests have been used as a theoretical framework and a backdrop for conceptual and empirical research to understand how knowledge is developed in different aspects of education. These applications are useful examples of how Habermas' cognitive interests can be used as a conceptual model for pedagogy (Huynh, 2005), a metaphor for evolving teaching practices (Brookfield & Holst, 2010), the creation of evaluation and assessment (Clement, 2015; Lovat, 2013), and to evaluate trends in adult education (Alexandra, 1991). As this review has explored the application of Habermas in educational research, the following section will explore the ways in which social work knowledge has been theoretically framed in the literature.

3.5 Comparing Theory of Knowing to other Theoretical Frameworks

As explored thus far in this chapter, the suitability of Habermas' theory of knowing as a theoretical framework is attributable to its alignment to social work student knowledge. Despite its relevance – other theoretical frameworks have been used to explore social work student knowledge, such as the Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) model. The Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) skills acquisition model identifies the process of skill acquisition for adult learners (Dreyfus, 2004). Comprised of five defined stages, novice, advanced beginner, competence, proficiency, and expertise, this model was used by Ryan and colleagues (1995) to examine knowledge and skill development among undergraduate social work students. The study revealed a shift in knowledge in terms of student confidence, integration of personal and professional experiences, and the development of a broader approach to social work practice (Ryan et al., 1995). Interestingly, the authors note that while the Dreyfus model captures growth in terms of clinical and professional skill, it does not account for the values and attitudes students hold prior to starting their education. In other words, students bring to their education particular views and attitudes which may remain unchanged even with professional training (Ryan et al., 1995). In professional practice, personal views and attitudes are often challenged and are to be well-managed to ensure practice is carried out ethically and in the best interest of the client populations. This reinforces the centrality of self in social work practice and should be considered when preparing students for practice, a view shared by Habermas.

A comparable theoretical approach is Kolb's learning style inventory, a cyclic model comprised of a four-stages, abstract conceptualization, active experimentation, concrete experiences, and reflective observations (Koob & Funk, 2002). This model has been used to examine how learning evolves through academic and practical skills training, which Williams and colleagues (2013) employed in their study. The study examined the learning styles of undergraduate social work students and findings revealed that students prefer various learning styles that range from experiential and practice-based exercises to fact-oriented

approaches through lecture and tutorials (Williams et al., 2013). In the final analysis, the finding supports the clear variability of learning styles and the profound impact this has on the development of knowledge and subsequent preparation for professional practice. As well, the authors conclude their study by acknowledging the complexity of social work education and point out that the simple transfer of knowledge from teacher to student does not promote sufficient knowledge integration, skills, and values (Williams et al., 2013).

While these frameworks maintain a linear focus to student knowledge, the authors do acknowledge that self-awareness (Ryan et al., 1995) and reflection are crucial for developing a deep understanding of social work (Williams et al., 2013). The importance of reflective learning in social work is also recognized by Lam and colleagues (2017) who used Kirkpatrick's evaluation model in their study exploring how students develop knowledge. Like the other frameworks, Kirkpatrick's evaluation model is a four-staged model that considers the acquisition of cognitive skill, achievement of affective-based outcomes, and behavioural changes (Lam et al., 2017). In this context, the model was used to capture the learning experience of social work students and identified a fluctuation of learning patterns over the course of their studies. The fluctuation is characterized by a 'bounce back' whereby students felt disillusioned and discouraged by academic setbacks in the earlier part of their studies. Further, students were eventually led to a renewed understanding and appreciation of themselves, and the knowledge acquired as they grew more confident throughout their education (Lam et al., 2017). These findings showcase the benefits of reflection and the curricula's responsibility to ensure students are afforded opportunities to explore uncertainties, enhance awareness, and are given time to enhance critical thinking capabilities (Lam et al., 2017). While the different levels of the Kirkpatrick Model encourage a comprehensive and holistic approach to the evaluation of social work education (Brown et al., 2008; Carter et al., 2011; Lam et al., 2017), there are limitations in terms of its rigidity and lack of contextualization.

While these frameworks have been used to examine social work student knowledge, it is worth highlighting theories which have used in the broader context of

knowledge engagement, namely, the work of Basil Bernstein. Revered for his influence on the sociology of knowledge (Singh, 2002), the application of Bernstein's work has been widely used in education (Ashwin, 2022; Chiang & Thurston, 2022; Hordern, 2017; Mclean et al., 2013). Among his many presuppositions, Bernstein considers the impact hierarchy, order, and class has on the production of equitable knowledge. With an interest in understanding class differentials and poor academic performance, Bernstein examined the social conditions in which students live and learn (Kwok & Singh, 2024) and the reproduction of social inequalities in the school system (Singh, 2002). Related work has unpacked the relationship between social class and education (Donnelly, 2018) and the ways in which these imbalances permeate pedagogy, curriculum, and access to knowledge. Bernsteinian concepts have examined knowledge acquisition among underserved student groups (Chiang & Thurston, 2022) and have been used as a mechanism for understanding the ways in which unequal distribution of knowledge relays inequalities in education (Mclean et al., 2013).

Among the breadth of his work, it is Bernstein's concept of pedagogic devices which has a particular congruency to this research. The pedagogic device is described as the ordering of knowledge where knowledge is relayed through prescribed rules (distributive, recontextualizing, and evaluative) and through a hierarchical ordering system, are converted into pedagogical forms (Singh, 2002). Ashwin (2022) contends that the pedagogic device exemplifies different forms of knowledge which he describes as knowledge-as-research, knowledge-as-curriculum, and knowledge-as-student understanding. Navigating these forms of knowledge is illustrative of knowledge transformation and the competing factors and social conditions which play a role in such transformation.

At a glance, there is a noteworthy intersection between Bernstein's pedagogic device and Habermas' theory of knowing as both theories provide a framing for how knowledge is realized. While the cognitive interests provide a more synergized and holistic view of knowing (Salim, 2020) rather than a hierarchical and power-informed approach advanced by Bernstein, both relay a multi-faceted understanding of

knowledge engagement. This multi-faceted understanding is reflected by the integration of distinct factors which facilitate the building of knowledge, providing a useful framing and conceptualization of knowledge transformation. While it is evident that Bernstein's work has contributed extensively to disciplinary knowledge, curriculum, and the ways in which students engage with knowledge, the sociological underpinnings of Bernstein's theory and the centrality of pedagogy are not entirely within the scope of this research. As previously highlighted, much of Bernstein's work has focused on disrupting inequality (Kwok & Singh, 2024) through consideration of social control (Singh, 2017), the perpetuation and hinderance of societal hierarchies in an educational context (Mclean et al., 2013), and the causal relationship between education and inequality (Chiang & Thurston, 2022). While these macro underpinnings are appealing to the social work discourse, particularly, considering social work's mandate for promoting social justice, the present research centers more on the individualized experiences of knowledge engagement and less so on the larger systemic conditions that permeate the knowing experience. Nevertheless, the future use of Bernstein's theory, particularly the pedagogic device would have much to offer future research on the study of social work student knowledge engagement.

Despite the widening research base of social work student knowledge and preparedness, the field requires a clearer understanding of how student's perceive preparedness and how they acquire, apply, and develop professional knowledge (Joubert, 2017; Wilson & Kelly, 2010). Of particular importance is a firmer understanding of how knowledge is translated to action and how transfer of knowledge is formalized (Benner et al., 2019: Lewis & Bolzan, 2007). Given the complexities of social work education, Habermas' theory of knowing provides a new angle as it considers a deeper and more sustained approach to knowledge development. The totality of Habermas' theory in terms of the cognitive interests are significant to this research due to the noteworthy connection between critical self-reflective and the study of social work student preparedness. The transformation that ensues from the knowledge guiding process aligns with knowledge engagement and

transformation according to Ashwin's work (Ashwin et al., 2012; Ashwin et al., 2014; Ashwin et al., 2016; Ashwin, 2022).

Specifically, as knowledge engagement considers how knowledge transforms students and how students transform knowledge, there is a particular emphasis on the role of 'self' in the learning process, as knowledge engagement encourages students to see themselves in relation to the world (Ashwin et al., 2014). This transformation relates closely to Habermas' thesis as his perspective advances a process of an evolving learner whose knowledge is not to be measured by "practical curriculum goals" (Lovat, 2003, p. 4) but their attitudes and actions to inspire change (Lovat, 2003). As I prepare to employ Habermas' theory of knowing to this research, I recognize the importance of highlighting the strengths of this theory as well as its limitations.

3.6 Limitations and Suitability of Habermas

While many assert that Habermas' theory of knowing has made valuable scholarly contributions, it has been met with resistance and critique. Specifically, some argue that this theory's vague descriptions and analysis create problems for its practical application (Sunstein, 1996) and useability as a valid approach (Burrell, 1994). These limitations make for a utopian idea (Hart, 1990) which has led to questions about Habermas' philosophical argument and useability as a framework (White, 1988). These arguments suggest that theory of knowing may be inaccessible and unattainable as a practical framework, which are justifiable views. To expand, theory of knowing was not originally conceived for education nor has Habermas' explicitly located this theory in educational research (Butler, 1997), which compromises its clarity. Despite these limitations, Habermas developed theory of knowing to articulate the motivation for knowledge creation (Quong, 2003) which regardless of its origins, does illuminate a strong connection to education. What some might consider vague, or utopian could also be viewed as open, interpretative, with the potential for reflexive application. Indeed, a notable strength of this theory stems from its common appeal as Habermas felt strongly that the cognitive interests are operative in any discipline (Clement et al., 2015; Lovat, 2013; Lovat, 2022), can

be applied to all forms of learning (Butler, 1997) and concerns all individuals (Bernstein, 1985). As such, the range of researchers who have used this theory across disciplines is a testament to its versatility and usefulness as a framework (Burrell, 1994) which I comfortably extend to the study of social work student knowledge.

To expand on its suitability, Habermas' thesis on knowledge development is a strong theoretical framing for this research as the field requires a deeper more holistic understanding of the development and translation of social work knowledge (Benner et al., 2019; Lewis & Bolzan, 2007; Wilson & Kelly, 2010). As such, the transformation of 'self' advanced by Habermasian theory and the total form of knowing to which these cognitive interests are said to achieve will help to illuminate the knowing process that informs how social work students come to develop their knowledge. Lastly, questions surrounding whether social work student knowledge is enough to sustain practice over time (Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996) can be considered through the emancipation of knowledge and the praxis realized through Habermasian theory. As I have now articulated why Habermas' theory of knowing is a suitable framework for this research, this final section will explore how it will be used in this research.

3.7 Employment of Theory of Knowing

Akin to some of the research highlighted in this chapter (Clement, 2013; Crotty, 2010; Lovat, 2004; Lovat et al., 2004) theory of knowing serves as a critical lens for examining and interpreting the development of social work student knowledge. This approach was similarly taken by Quong (2003) who used Habermas' cognitive interests as an interpretative frame to examine school leadership practices. In a similar approach, this research uses theory of knowing as an interpretative frame as the cognitive interests are described as an "act of reflection" and "human construct" (Quong, 2003, p. 77) which support the interpretative and relativist paradigm underpinning this research. The theoretical orientations which have been described are actualized through this study's research questions and are summarized in the figure 3.1 below.
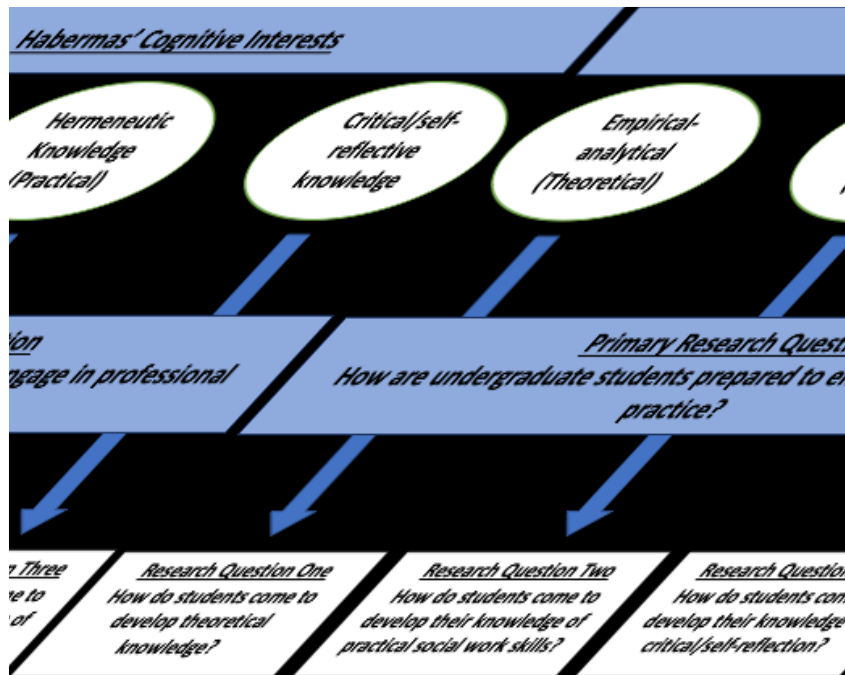
Figure 3.1 Illustration depicting the research questions within Habermas' theory of knowing

This image illustrates the positioning of Habermas' theory and the process of its use. At the center of the figure is this study's primary research question which illustrates the overall aim of this project. The positioning of the cognitive interests at the top of the figure represents their equal weight and presence in the framing of the research and are further represented in the sub-research questions at the bottom of the figure. As the image shows, Habermas' cognitive interests are centrally located in the sub-research question and bring together the concept of knowledge and preparedness as they serve to unpack and respond to the overall research question. Further, the framing of these sub-questions serve as a lens for which the data is examined, viewed, and interpreted through the lens of Habermas' theory of knowing. As this chapter has provided theoretical context for

this research, the next chapter will build on this foundation by detailing the methodological application of Habermasian theory and the approaches used.

Chapter Four

Methods

4.1 Introduction

As this chapter covers the methodological approaches used to guide this research, an appropriate point of departure is to revisit this study's four research questions which are listed below.

1: How are undergraduate students prepared to engage in professional practice?

2: How do students come to develop their theoretical knowledge?

3: How do students come to develop their knowledge of practical social work skills?

4: How do students come to develop their knowledge of critical/self-reflection?

This chapter will outline the methods used to respond to these research questions by presenting the philosophical underpinnings of this research, the steps taken for data collection and analysis, while also covering ethical considerations, the researcher's position, and limitations.

4.2 Ontological and Epistemological Positions

The value that lived experience, subjectivity, and meaning bring to this study have influenced its relativist and interpretivist underpinning. The relativist ontological orientation is used because of the view that human action and interaction produce reality and subjective understanding (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Subjectivist understanding centralizes individual notions of reality (Schraw, 2012) and the manner in which realities are prescribed meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This subjective premise misaligns with positivist-centered positions such as realism, which views reality as an objective truth that is external and untainted by subjectivity (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This fixed conceptualization is incompatible with this research considering the focus on individual interpretations of knowledge and how students engage with it. To expand, a static interpretation of reality would not capture the subjectivist nature of knowledge engagement or the ways in which knowledge transformation prepares students for practice. The study of knowledge

engagement calls for pluralistic points of view, which stem from individual experiences, interpretation of knowledge and how it is realized. As highlighted by Peile and McCout (1997), the relativist approach sees merit in obtaining multiple perspectives about a particular situation. In this instance, the multiple perspectives are presented by students, newly trained social workers, and faculty. The situation in question is social work knowledge and the ways in which students engage with it.

In alignment with relativism, this research leads with an interpretivist epistemological orientation as it underscores the significance of individual worldviews, subjective experiences, and the meaning attached to experiences (Punch, 2014). Interpretivists are interested in the *why* and *how* as they seek to understand individual constructions, interpretations, and shared consciousness (Berryman, 2019). Understanding the *why* and *how* appropriately aligns with knowledge engagement because to conceptualize how students engage with disciplinary knowledge is to understand how students interpret their understanding, how they experience knowledge, and why certain knowledge areas are important to development and subsequent practice.

Akin to relativism, interpretivism misaligns with positivist ideals which emphasize truth and fixed forms of knowledge.   While at one point positivism was social work's dominant research paradigm, it has since been viewed as offering limited perspectives and objectivity (Peile & McCout, 1997) as it advances a singular form of reality where knowledge is developed as truth (Park et al., 2020). The goal of this research is not to pinpoint a singular understanding as the study of knowledge engagement is to examine how students come to see themselves and their knowledge in relation to the world (Ashwin, 2023). The pursuit of objectivity or truth would be incompatible with this aim as knowledge engagement and the way it connects individuals to the world is not a predictable or static concept, but rather, has an exploratory research quality based on subjective meaning (Peile & McCout, 1997). While some positivist researchers have come to accept that reality is inevitably shaped by subjective realities, this post-positivist position

remains inherently linked to objective knowing (Braun & Clarke, 2022), maintaining its incompatibly to this research.

4.3 Methodology

Knowledge Engagement as a Phenomenon

Aligning with the relativist and interpretivist underpinning, this research employs a qualitive research design with a phenomenological orientation. Phenomenology examines the world as it is experienced (Van Manen, 2014) and considers how experiences are transformed into consciousness (Merriam & Disdell, 2014). As a research design, phenomenology explores different forms of lived experiences such as events, situations, or concepts (Astalin, 2013; Newberry, 2012). In this instance, the phenomenon is social work knowledge and the ways in which students engage and come to develop their understanding. The study of this phenomenon is explored through the lived experiences of students, social workers, and faculty, all of which are closely connected to social work practices and the cultivation of social work knowledge. Tapping into the shared experiences of students, social workers, and faculty in the context of social work knowledge is demonstrative of phenomenology as this approach focuses on the experiences of a particular group (Grossoehme, 2014) by going directly to the source of experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As such, engaging directly with those who carry the experience of knowledge engagement is an area of focus for this research and is well-suited to the phenomenological orientation.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Under the umbrella of phenomenology are different iterations of this approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), with this research orienting towards features of hermeneutic phenomenology. To highlight the suitability of hermeneutic phenomenology, this chapter will provide a brief overview of its philosophical counterpart, descriptive phenomenology. Coined by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938)

descriptive phenomenology connects the perception of individual experiences to the subjective meaning of phenomenon (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). While the value of lived experience is linked to subjectivity, descriptive phenomenologists take lived experience by its honest presentation, without outside influence or context. In other words, descriptive phenomenology has some objective influence because experiences shared are taken descriptively and in isolation from outside interpretation (Tuohy et al., 2013). Comparatively, hermeneutic phenomenology (Martin Heidegger 1889-1976) takes phenomenology beyond a place of description and towards a place of interpretation (Mackey, 2005). While both positions centralize lived experience and subjective understanding, a helpful way to distinguish these approaches is articulated by Bynum and Varpio (2018),

"Descriptive phenomenology is to describe a phenomenon as a distinct entity separate from the context…hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to describe the meaning of a phenomenon and understand the contextual forces that shape it" (p. 252).

The interpretative aspect of hermeneutic phenomenology is well-suited to this research because of the active role of the researcher. The active and interpretative role of the researcher is connected to the seminal concept *"Dasein"* which is the idea that "experiences are based on our context of the world…and as humans, we cannot separate from our contexts" (Miles et al., 2013, p. 420). From a methodological perspective, this interpretative role requires the researcher to "openly reflect on, share, and attend to their subjectivity during data collection and analysis…" (Bynum & Varpio, 2018, p. 252). To honor the descriptive nature of experiences as found in descriptive phenomenology, researchers must separate themselves from the research by bracketing their outside knowledge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In contrast, hermeneutic researchers will consider their experience and expertise (Bynum & Varpio, 2018; Tuohy et al., 2013) and use it as a tool to interpret the meanings found in relation to the phenomena (Sloan et al., 2014). In summary, the integration of my lived experience in social work practice and

education affirms this study's affinity and suitability of hermeneutic phenomenology. Additionally, as phenomenology has been characterized as the optimal approach for understanding experiences (Bynum & Varpio, 2018) this research has taken cues from those who have used phenomenology in similar research contexts (Ashwin et al.,2014; Ashwin et al., 2016; Ashwin et al., 2023; Miles et al., 2013; Newberry, 2012; Tuohy et al., 2013).

4.4 Semi-Structured Interviews

As subjective and meaning-focused orientations are important to this research, individual interviews were the chosen method for data collection. Holding a valued place in social science research for more than a century (Adler & Clark, 2015), qualitative interviews are deemed "a very good way of accessing people's perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations, and constructions of reality" (Punch, 2014, p. 144). Considering the centrality of individual experiences, interviews were best suited for capturing social work students' perceptions and development of their knowledge. This rationale is supported by Seidman (2013) who posits that interviews are appropriate when individual accounts, experiences, and meanings are important to the research.

Akin to other research methods, there are different approaches to interviewing, as highlighted by Minichiello and colleagues (1990) who place interviews along a continuum from structured, to semi-structured, to the unstructured. In this research, semi-structured interviews were used to provide structure while also leaving room for added dialogue and reflection. This balance allows for flexibility while also ensuring the purpose and scope of the research is met with structure (Kallio et al., 2016). In this instance, structure is established using Habermas' cognitive interests and the framing of the interviewing questions encourage organic discussion and participant reflection. Creating space for unplanned discussion positively contributes to data collection (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) as the task in this study was not to garner factual responses as seen with structured interviews, but to explore meaning and symbolism (Punch, 2014).

Three sets of interview questions (see appendix A.1, A.2 and A.3) were developed to capture the distinct experiences of participant groups, which include students, social workers, and faculty. While each iteration was framed using Habermas' cognitive interests, questions were tailored to each group in relation to knowledge engagement. The student interviews focused on perceptions and experience with knowledge and specific opportunities to engage with their respective knowledge. Additional questions were included to garner insight into student interest in social work, their future, and the value placed on certain skills and capabilities. For social work participants, interview questions focused on the knowledge developed as a student and emphasized the translation of knowledge to practice. Additional questions pertaining to the realities of social work practice in terms of challenges faced, preparedness for practice, and educational impact. For the faculty, questions were tailored to uncover approaches used to observe and assess specific forms of knowledge engagement, as well as specific pedagogical strategies used in the teaching and learning environment. Additional questions were used to examine the health and effectiveness of social work curricula and its contribution to student preparedness.

The interview script for students and faculty comprised of fifteen questions and the script for social workers comprised of seventeen questions. All initial interviews were scheduled for approximately 35 to 45 minutes, though, each interview had a flexible timeframe of upward to 55 minutes. Thirty-four interviews were held over a five-month period with student interviews held from March 2023 to May 2023, social work interviews from May 2023 to June 2023, and faculty interviews from June 2023 to July 2023. All interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom software to allow for audio recording, transcription, and to accommodate for any geographic restrictions. My comfortability with conducting virtual interviews is due to the benefits and opportunities it provided in terms of the scale of my research. To expand, engaging with three participant groups which spanned Canada and the United States and with the reality of conflicting schedules, virtual interviewing helped to overcome barriers related to geographic

restrictions and time constraints (Sah et al., 2020). While there may have been opportunities to conduct in-person interviews for those located in reasonable distances, to ensure consistency across all participant interactions, I felt is necessary to use the same approach when interviewing all participants. This approach demonstrates a consistent effort to secure an increased level of comfort and naturalness for all participants as virtual interviews gives participants the agency to participate from environments where they are more relaxed (Oliffe & Yu, 2021).

4.5 Sampling

A purposive homogenous sampling approach was used as this method is suitable when research is focused on the examination of a specific characteristic within a population group (Punch, 2014). In this context, the participant population were students in their final two years of study in a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program, newly trained social workers, and faculty of a BSW Program. While the binding characteristic among participants is the affiliation with social work education and practice, additional inclusion criteria were used to ensure the sampling plan and parameters were in line with the research questions.

Within the student group, inclusion criteria included:

- Students in their final year or just completed their final year of study in a BSW program accredited by the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE).
- Eligibility to register with appropriate regulatory body as a social worker either immediately following graduation or after successful completion of a Master of Social Work Program.

Within the social work group, inclusion criteria included:

- Registered social worker in good standing with regulatory body.
- Graduate of a social work program (BSW preferred) within two years and accredited by the CSWE.

Within the faculty group, inclusion criteria included:

- Employed as a faculty (full-time/part-time/sessional) in an accredited BSW program.

The sample comprised of twelve students, nine social workers, and thirteen faculty totaling thirty-four participants. While this number exceeds the initial target of thirty participants, this sample size was suitable for the purpose and feasibility of this study (Baker & Edwards, 2012). As this research embraces an interpretivist philosophy a smaller sample size allowed for the gathering of "descriptions of…lived experience which are rich in detail and imagery" (Grossoehme, 2014, p. 8). Further, when employing orientations that rely on the experiences of participants, sample size can be determined by the degree of involvement with participants (Cohen et al., 2000). In this instance, this research did not require rigorous, ongoing, or intense interactions with participants over an extended period and therefore this sample size was deemed appropriate.

4.6 Recruitment Strategy

To maximize recruitment efforts, different strategies were used to recruit research participants. Within the student group, two strategies were used and the first involved connecting directly with program administrators of Bachelor of Social Work Programs across Canada. Using the Canadian Association of Social Work Education Institution Directory as a starting point, a list of institutions that offer BSW programs were used to make direct contact with program administrators. Administrators received an expression of interest letter, which detailed the nature and scope of the project, and once a response was received, the participant information sheet was circulated. Of the twelve institutions, two institutions confirmed their willingness to circulate a poster detailing the nature of the study, participant incentives, and contact information. The incentives included a $30.00 gift card to Amazon. The participating institutions did not require ethics approval from their institutions as I provided Lancaster University's REB approval.   Of the twelve student participants interviewed, six were recruited using this approach. The second strategy involved using my own networking resources by having colleagues distribute research details to their network, as well as the use of the professional networking site Linkedin. Using Linkedin, a random search for undergraduate social work students was conducted to individuals whose

professional profile indicated 'BSW student' and who were enrolled in a BSW program affiliated with the Canadian Association of Social Work Education. Using the same script sent to program administrators, six participants were recruited using this strategy.

Social workers and faculty were recruited through advertising efforts with the Ontario Association of Social Workers (OASW). The OASW is a voluntary organization in Canada that advances the interest of social workers through education, advocacy, and knowledge mobilization. As members are social workers or enrolled/recently graduated from an accredited BSW program, this association has a large reach of social workers in the province of Ontario. Through a paid advertisement, the study details were circulated to all members in May 2023 and a high response rate for participation was received. All nine social workers were recruited using this strategy as were five faculty. An additional nine faculty participants were recruited through the researchers own networking resources where colleagues distributed study details to their networks.

4.7 Participant Profiles

There was a total of thirty-four participants and of the thirty-four, twelve were undergraduate social work students, nine were newly trained social workers, and thirteen were faculty. The specific participant demographics are detailed in the charts below.

Group # 1 – Students			
Name	**Pronouns**	**Year**	**Province of Study**
Effie	Female	Third Year	Alberta
Kevin	Female	Fourth year	Alberta
Cassandra	Female	Third year	Alberta
Lora	Female	Third year	Ontario
Daniella	Female	Final year	Alberta
Tyler	Non-conforming	Final year	Ontario

Andie	Female	Final year	Ontario
Betty-Anne	Female	Third year	Ontario
Jules	Female	Third year	Ontario
Judy	Female	Third year	Ontario
Savannah	Female	Third year	Ontario
Tenesha	Female	Final year	Ontario

Table 4.1 Demographic summary of research participants in the student group

Group # 2 – Social Workers		
Pseudonym	**Pronouns**	**Province of Employment**
Camilla	Female	Ontario
Fatima	Female	Ontario
Kelly	Female	Ontario
Carl	Male	Alberta
Nadia	Female	Ontario
George	Male	Ontario
Amy	Female	Ontario
Clarissa	Female	Ontario
Joelle	Female	Ontario

Table 4.2 Demographic summary of research participants in the social work group

Group # 3 – Faculty		
Pseudonym	**Pronouns**	**Country of Employment**
Andrew	Male	Canada
Deborah	Female	Canada
Christian	They/Them	Canada
Lora	Female	Canada
Justin	Male	Canada

Jodie	Female	Canada
Larry	Male	The United States
David	Male	The United States
Timothy	Male	The United States
William	Male	The United States
Carlos	Male	The United States
Manny	Male	The United States
Kenneth	Male	The United States

4.3 Demographic summary of research participants in the faculty group

To ease concerns around disclosure, the names of the institutions are not included as this information does not bear any weight to analysis and subsequent findings.

4.8 Ethics Overview

In December 2022 this research received ethics approval from Lancaster University's Research Ethics Board (REB). As part of the recruitment strategy and ahead of participation, participants were provided a participation information sheet reviewing the details of the study. The details included the nature and scope of the study, benefits, voluntary nature, right to withdraw risks, use of data and plans for research dissemination (see appendix b-d). Participants were required to confirm their understanding by providing written consent prior to individual interviewing. REB approval from participating institutions was included in Lancaster's REB application, however, it was not required by either institution. To ensure transparency, during correspondence with program administers, a copy of this study's approved REB from Lancaster University was provided.

To support confidentiality and participant comfort all interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom software. Any non-audio storage was kept in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office. Interview recordings were kept on my encrypted computer device that only I had access to. All recordings were

destroyed once the data had been transcribed, checked, and saved to the encrypted computer device. The online software used to transcribe the interviews had no identifying information included in the transcripts during transcription. Additionally, all references in the research to the interview participants, or use of their direct quotes, were anonymized using pseudonyms.

4.9 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the principles of Braun and Clarke's Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as this approach is "fully embedded" in the qualitative paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 5) and is well-suited to this study. Braun and Clarke (2022) outline six phases to RTA and while RTA is not a linear approach to data analysis, this phased approach adds useful structuring to this discussion and will be expanded on below.

A Six-Phase Approach to Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Familiarization with the data

Familiarization involves reviewing, re-reviewing, and becoming intimately familiar with the dataset (Byrne, 2022). There were three phases of familiarizations with phase one involving the initial transcribing of all interviews using the online transcription software *Otter*. Phase two and three involved a meticulous review of each transcript while listening to the audio to capture any inaccuracies during transcription. The dataset came from all thirty-four transcribed interviews and were coded using the computer assisted qualitative data analysis software, MAXQDA.

Generating initial codes

To ensure a thorough and rigorous coding process, a minimum of two rounds of data review are suggested (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2022). Following this advice, three rounds of coding were completed to engage in a gradual process of working through and distilling the data. In round one, 31 code labels (see appendix) were identified and treated as *semantic codes* which "capture explicitly-expressed meaning; they often stay close to the language of participants" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 57). During round two, the 31 semantic

code labels were further explored and distilled into 21 code labels and categorized into five groups. The reduction in code labels was the result of some deletions and the merging of codes. This second round reflects a deductive approach to analysis as the categories shown on the left part of the table are based on the study's research questions which are framed within Habermas' theory of knowing. In this case, the research questions and theoretical framework "provide a lens through which a researcher interprets and makes sense of the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 57). The following table illustrates round two of coding.

Categories	21 Code Labels (Descriptive)
Theoretical Knowledge	- Knowledge of practice - Use of theory - Knowledge of theory - Use of practice - Practical skill development - Theoretical skill development
Communicative Knowledge	- Practice Wisdom - Ascribing meaning to practice - Ascribing meaning to theory - The transferring of knowledge to practice
Critical Inquiry	- Knowledge of critical thinking - Application of critical thinking - Development of self-reflection - How to transfer knowledge to practice
Self	- Transformation of Identity - Confidence - Intuitive and naturally informed qualities
Student transformation to Practicing Professional	- Helpful teaching strategies - Preparedness - Practice based teaching - Instructor Approach

4.4 Round two of coding: List of categories and code labels

The third round of coding resulted in 15 code labels which remained in their respective categories. These code labels can be described as *latent* codes which are more implicit and further away from obvious content (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In RTA, to shift from semantic to latent codes is not uncommon as codes reflect a continuum of perspective and the way data is viewed (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Here the approach shifted from a deductive to inductive orientation as it was during this phase where the meaning behind the data became the stronger place for analysis. In other words, the refined code labels became "reflective of the content of the data" (Bryne, 2022, p. 1397) and were no longer predicated by description of the research questions.

Categories	15 code labels (latent)
Theoretical Knowledge	- Practice knowledge is digestible - Theory is a framework - Theory is debateable - Practical skills are about "getting a feel" - Theory is good "in theory"
Communicative Knowledge	- Practice wisdom as a comfortable concept - How to attach meaning to knowledge - Interaction promotes knowledge transfer
Critical Inquiry	- Critical thinking is perspective taking - You can't force reflection - Critical thinking is not a purely academic construct – learn in the moment
Self and Student Transformation	- Transformation of Identity - Confidence is preparedness - Self-trust is the use of intuition

Table 4.5 Round three of coding: List of categories and code labels

This phase begins when the researcher looks to interpret meaning across the data set (Bryne, 2022). This iterative process is highly exploratory, interpretative, and immersive as codes are combined, meanings are hypothesized, and relationships are identified between codes to create a cluster of ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Bryne, 2022). During this stage, four candidate themes were identified, *the value of planned and unplanned experiences, the use of instinct and meaningful understanding, critical thinking is a concept to be experienced,* and *self-transformation of identity.* These candidate themes were a product of "visual mapping" which uses illustrations to cue themes and relationships across the data (Braun and Clarke, 2022). The image below features the development of the candidate theme *critical thinking is a concept to be experienced* and illustrates my approach to visual mapping. As showcased, code labels and corresponding text segments were handwritten on post-it notes and placed on chart paper to capture the initial mapping of my data set.
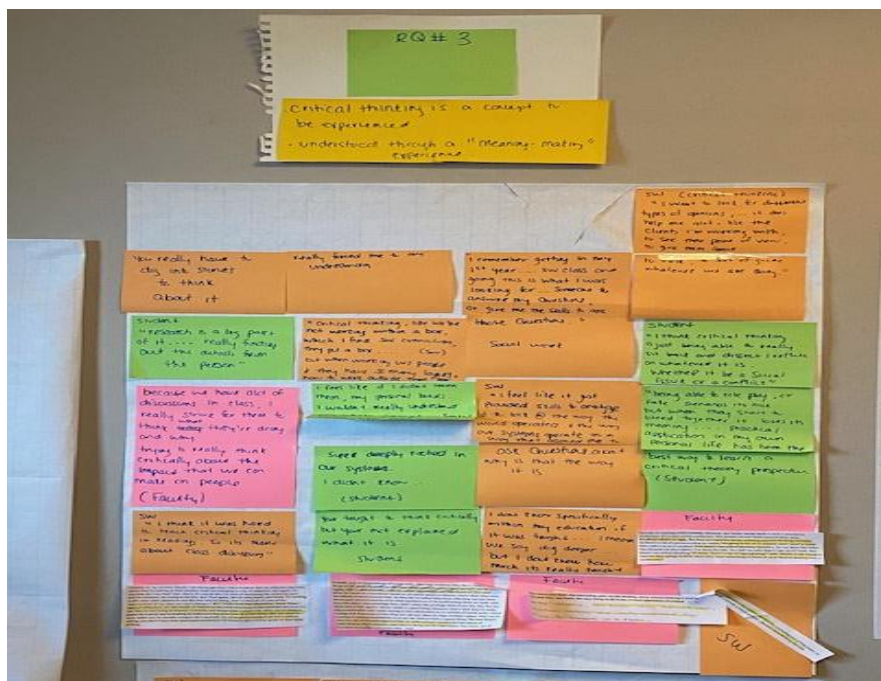
4.6   *Example of visual mapping*

Developing, reviewing themes, and naming themes

These final stages are used as viability checks (Braun & Clarke, 2022) by re-engaging with the data, code labels, and candidate themes to find alignment between the data and candidate themes. As part of the review and viability process, the same visual mapping protocol was followed by revisiting each candidate theme and corresponding code labels which were captured on individual pieces of chart paper. After reviewing each theme independent of the others, all pieces of chart paper (candidate themes) were organized side-by-side to view all candidate themes, corresponding code labels, and text segments as a unit. During this exercise, candidate themes were merged and refined until they were no longer topic summaries, showed diversity within the data, were distinct, while also capturing the story of my research (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 97). The outcome of this phase led the development of the final themes, *practice makes perfect, the pursuit of meaning,* and *know thy self* as shown in the table below.

Candidate Themes	Named Themes
The value of planned and unplanned experiences	Practice Makes Perfect
Critical thinking is a concept to be experience	The Pursuit of Meaning
The use of instinct and meaning Understanding	Know Thy Self
Self-transformation of identity	

4.7 Theme development: Summary of candidate and named themes

4.10 Researcher Position

My pre-existing knowledge of social work coupled with my professional experience as a social worker and educator has placed me in an insider researcher position. Insider researchers undertake research with those who have common characteristics, including occupation (Greene, 2014). While I had no prior

affiliations with the participants, my insider positionality aligned my identity as a former social work student, social worker, and educator with the identity of my participants (Greene, 2014). This insider position adds a level of subjectivity to this research and while this has merit, a pitfall is the impact subjective understanding can have on the research outcome. As I can appreciate the concerns regarding the use of interpretation and whether it gives too much voice to researchers (Eaves et al., 2000), it needn't be viewed as a limitation as there is value in my interpretative presence as it aligns with the overall scope of the research.

As expressed earlier, my affinity for hermeneutic phenomenology is because the use of my lived experience in social work education and practice proved to be beneficial during data collection and analysis. When discussing the valued connection between hermeneutic phenomenology and social work, Newberry (2012) posits that insider knowledge allows the researchers to "attend to what is unspoken, as well as what is spoken" (p. 15), which enhanced data collection and analysis. My technical understanding of social work theories, clinical practices, and discipline-specific terms supported my ability to see beyond face-value descriptions and engage more critically with the meaning behind those descriptions. While I was careful not to share my lived experiences during the interview process, my familiarity with social work practices and educational approaches enabled me to speak the same language as the participants and brought useful clarity and understanding during data collection. Additionally, my knowledge proved to be useful during the interpretative process of data analysis. Particularly, my foundational understanding of social work education and practice initiated the critical reflexivity process which is an important feature of reflexive thematic analysis. However useful my lived experience was to this research; I did take cautionary measures by practicing transparency.

Tracy (2010) asserts that "rigorous analysis is marked by transparency regarding the process of sorting, choosing, and organizing the data" (p. 841). My transparency is demonstrated by the details shared in this chapter and appendices

as all aspects of data collection, coding, and analysis are presented descriptively (Yardley, 2016). Additionally, when discussing transparency in terms of research quality, Yardley (2016) states that disclosure of the researcher's role, experiences, and motivations give context to the factors which may affect the research investigation. I demonstrated transparency with participants by stating my personal and professional interest in the research topic, including my experience as a social worker, social work educator, and social work student. Additionally, as discovery of biases and blind spots is a priority item in research (Mehra, 2002), I was careful to manage influence where I could. For example, exclusionary criteria during recruitment were to ensure I did not interview students or faculty affiliated with the university where I am employed as I was mindful of the impact this may have on participant feedback and reflections.

4.11 Limitations

By interviewing students, social workers, and faculty, this research engaged with multiple perspectives from a range of institutions, practice areas, and levels of teaching experience. While I am grateful to have garnered a variety of perspectives and experiences from a wide participant base, this research would be strengthened using a longitudinal approach. Presently, this research reveals a "snapshot" (Ashwin et al, 2023) of how students engage with knowledge and in what ways it translates to preparedness. While the approach to data collection and analysis supports a rich illustration of these snapshots, a longitudinal approach would broaden the scope by capturing how knowledge evolves and aids in preparedness. To explore the development of knowledge over a period of time may help to identify specific educational experiences where students are more likely to construct theoretical, practical, and critical forms of knowledge and in turn, highlight which aspects of the degree contribute to that understanding. The benefit of longitudinal application is reflected by the work of Ashwin and colleagues (2023) who writes *"gaining a sense of how these accounts change over time is important in order to examine the impact that student's educational experiences have on their changing understanding of these structured bodies of*

knowledge" (p. 1068). While this research contributes valuably to the study of knowledge of engagement by providing multiple perspectives, a longitudinal approach would certainly enhance the field's understanding of students evolving relationship with knowledge and the development of professional identities.

Chapter Five

Findings and Discussion: Part One

5.1 Introduction

The aim of this research is to explore the preparedness of undergraduate social work students by examining the ways in which students engage with theoretical, practical, and critical knowledge. The findings will be presented as themes and will be analyzed with reference to participant reflections and contextualized within Habermas' theory of knowing. This discussion will span three chapters including part one which will review the theme *practice makes perfect*, part two which will present the theme *the pursuit of meaning* and part three *know thy self.* The following section will present the theme *practice makes perfect* by analysing the ways in which students come to develop their theoretical and practical knowledge.

5.2 Prelude to analysis of Theoretical Knowledge

The research findings unveiled this first theme *practice makes perfect* because of a dichotomous relationship identified between theoretical and practical knowledge. This relationship is reflected by different levels of interest, understanding, and overall conceptualization of theoretical and practical knowledge. While both are important to the development of social work student knowledge, these findings align with a known disconnect between theory and practice (Frost et al., 2013; Healy & Meagher, 2004; Tham & Lynch, 2014; Wilson & Kelly, 2010). In a social work context, theoretical knowledge are concepts rooted in theory, validity, and evidence (Sheppard et al, 2000, Sheppard et al., 2001; Sheppard & Ryan, 2003) and participants were asked to reflect on their understanding of theory, the development of theoretical knowledge, and its application to practice. Through this section, the presentation and analysis of the research findings will be explored in connection to the empirical-analytical

cognitive interest within Habermas' theory of knowing. The empirical-analytical interest is predictive and serves as a frame of reference whereby rules and evidence are provided without subjective inquiry (Habermas, 1966; Habermas, 1971), drawing parallels to theoretical knowledge. These parallels provide justification for why theoretical knowledge is examined using the empirical-analytical interest and will be explored throughout the analysis. The findings presented in this section will first explore perceptions of theoretical knowledge and in what ways students engage with their knowledge.

5.3 Perceptions of Theoretical Knowing

As connections have been drawn between student's relationship with knowledge and attitudes towards knowledge (Ashwin et al., 2023), understanding student's views of theoretical knowledge is an important area of inquiry. Participants reflected on their understanding of theory and the finding revealed competing perspectives, with some viewing theoretical knowledge as a valuable contributor to practice.

It just gives us…the kind of groundwork as to how people might be feeling in certain situations and how those feelings respond to different actions (Andie, fourth year student).

It's important to know why you're approaching something and what you want out of your approach (Daniella, fourth year student).

I think what I get out of theory is the different perspectives. So, it's like "okay, I didn't think of it that way" because this is my lived experience, my worldview, and I see things through that (Effie, third year student).

In these instances, theoretical knowledge is deemed valuable because of the perspective and framing it provides students. In comparable research, social work students have positively reflected on the helpful interpretative features theory

provides practice-based social circumstances (Lewis & Bolzan, 2007). Additionally, students have expressed appreciation for the opportunity to "trace in practice the issues that they have learned in theory" (Kinni, 2021, p. 906). Similar benefits were noted by faculty who commented on the importance of integrating theory in the academic environment.

It [theory] plays a big part of my teaching practices. You need to know it in order to go into social work…you need to know the theory first because in order to know that theory, you have to work with the books, and the people who have experience using the books and working in the field that you want to go into as well (Justin, faculty).

The theory initially is extraordinarily important for new practitioners because they don't have enough experience (Christian, faculty).

The university does a really good job of giving the foundation of theory. So, there's a couple of courses that are offered that are very theory focused, which I think is very helpful…there's an opportunity to look at not just the clinical (Lora, faculty).

Common across these perspectives is the view that theory lays important groundwork for knowledge development and eventual practice. This groundwork is akin to the framing advanced by Habermas' empirical-analytical cognitive interest. According to Habermas (1971), the empirical-analytical interest is pre-established knowing which pre-judges subjective understanding and is used as a frame of reference for knowledge development. This frame of reference is rooted in fact and logic (Clement et al., 2015) and because of its predictive nature (Habermas, 1966; Habermas, 1971) establishes rules for the construction of ideas (Pusey, 1987). In essence, the empirical-analytical interest provides a foundation of understanding to which any further inquiry is built from.

In a social work context, theory guides practitioner understanding by providing a baseline of knowledge, a lens for decision making (Trevithick, 2000) and the promotion of critically informed and reflective practice (Teater, 2010). Further research highlights that theoretical knowledge has broader professional benefit as it adds necessary grounding, substantiation, and legitimacy to the social work field (McCafferty & Taylor, 2022). While these perspectives and the findings presented thus far highlight positive perceptions of theoretical knowledge, this view is not held in consensus. The following reflections offer other perspectives of theory in social work where its useability and relevance are questioned.

There is a lot of talk about theory but at least from my understanding and my group of friends understanding it's not something that is done in practice (Effie, third year student).

So, there was many foundational courses about different schools of thought and in those courses, I got lost…It just went over my head (Nadia, social worker).

I like the theories, but I find it's hard to just say them on top of your head. Like, I'm gonna write a paper, but I need to reread them [theories] again without knowing them on the top of my mind. I can't actually absorb, apply or interpret what they actually want (Judy, third year student).

As evidenced by these reflections, favourable perceptions of theory are not universally shared. While it would be reasonable to attribute this divergence to a lack of theoretical exposure, theory is known to occupy a large part of social work curricula (Fisher & Somerton, 2000). This perspective is supported by these findings as it was expressed across all participant groups that theory has a dominant place in the curricula. For example, when asked to reflect on the theoretical courses relevant to practice, participants from each group commented on frequency of theory-based courses.

I feel like all of them. To be honest, it's all been very theory based (Andie, third year student).

I feel like every class is a lot of theory, that is kind of mostly what we do. So, for instance in my intercultural practice class, I feel like every week we are learning about a new theory. I don't know I feel like every class is 90% theory (Effie, third year student).

There is theory and research every week (Christian, faculty).

Habermas posits that the empirical-analytical function generates knowledge that can be taken "just as it is" (Habermas, 2004, p. 310). From a curricular perspective, this can be beneficial as a theoretical emphasis provides continuity in understanding, which is important to knowledge development. However necessary, there is an apparent disconnect between exposure and understanding because while there are opportunities to engage with theoretical knowledge, students remain divided on its relevance and use in practice. Joubert (2017) made a similar discovery when examining readiness for social work practice, noting that undergraduate students were ambivalent about how theory is defined and its use in practice. As such, understanding the specific means for which students come to develop theoretical knowledge is an important area of inquiry. As knowledge engagement is defined as the development of understanding (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) it is pertinent to unpack the ways in which students engage with theoretical knowledge in the academic environment. During the interviews, participants were asked to reflect on aspects of their education that teach theory relevant to social work by highlighting specific assessments used.

There was a lot of reading articles, analysing those articles, and then relating

them to the different types of theories and looking at the articles through those lenses (Tenisha, fourth year student).

So right now, I am taking an intercultural practice class and I am writing a paper on intersectionality so, no matter what we are doing it goes back to theory (Cassandra, third year student).

One example would be assignments that I create that do require the measured use of theory and research. So, I'm pretty prescriptive in terms of what I'm looking for…its summarizing theory based on articles… and then how would you apply a certain concept from whatever theory into either case scenario, or the use of self or, or something like that (Andrew, faculty).

The readings and the assignments, the way that they're created, is really to show and link to literature, from readings from lectures from outside, you know, their own research, etc. (Jodie, faculty).

These reflections illustrate the use of theoretical concepts in course assessments such as readings, research paper, and examinations. Referred by Roulston et al. (2018) as knowledge for practice activities, these forms of assessments measure competence of theoretical knowledge through more formalized tasks. Through these assessments students engage in a cognitive process as opposed to an immersive learning experience where learning is more contextualized (Campbell, 2012). This cognitive process is akin to Habermas' empirical-analytical interest as these approaches are grounded in written tasks which involve a level of prediction, recall, and comprehension in terms of criteria and evaluation. Further, these knowledge assessments garner a level of control comparable to the empirical-analytical function as conditions are established and results are measured based on the completion of assessments using those conditions (Habermas, 2004). In other words, students come to develop their

theoretical knowledge through more structured and finite tasks where conditions are established, criteria is predetermined, and students are subsequently evaluated on their ability to meet that predetermined criteria. These examples connect educative approaches surrounding theory to the empirical analytical function based on the centralization of repetition and structure (Villalobos-Buehner, 2021). While research participants did not explicitly elaborate on the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of these assessments, there is reason to believe that students engage more comfortably with theoretical knowledge when explored in a meaningful and contextualized way. This assertion is illustrated by Lora, a third-year undergraduate student and Carl a newly trained social worker.

I'm doing a research paper on trans women accessing shelters in Toronto and I'm trying to draw on things such as gender passing, and…theories around discrimination and gender identity. We have lots of little aspects that we can touch on which is good because it opens our eyes to things you wouldn't think of talking about or researching or discussing. It kind of gives us free rein that way and it's not really closed to the topics, we can explore (Lora, third year student).

One assignment involved having to design this community development initiative. When this happened I just emailed my professor and asked "can I just write about this thing that I did in my community work?" The answer was yes and I just kind of learned to put the social work language around things that that I've been doing in a professional context (Carl, social worker).

Social work students tend to view their learning more enthusiastically when applied in specific learning contexts (Van Bommel et al., 2015). For example, Lora exhibited a notable level of passion and enthusiasm as she had the agency to explore theories she personally connected to and engaged with her theoretical knowledge in a meaningful way. Comparably, Carl exhibited a heightened level of appreciation for the ability to integrate his professional experience and interests

into his work and by extension, engage with theoretical knowledge in a relevant and applied context. While Lora and Carl were tasked to engage with their theoretical knowledge through written tasks, a transformation of understanding occurred as they located their knowledge in relation to their area of study, which according to Ashwin et al. (2014) is how knowledge is transformed.

5.4 Engaging with theoretical knowledge: Less why and more how

As evidenced by these findings, theory has a strong presence in social work curricula and engagement with theoretical knowledge can be achieved through various knowledge guiding activities. While there is an appreciation for theoretical knowledge in terms of its value, students continue to grapple with their use of theoretical knowledge. This competing relationship with theoretical knowledge is not attributable to lack of awareness or exposure considering the number of participants who commented on the level of theory reflected in their courses. Rather, these challenges can be attributed to student's ability to connect with theoretical knowledge which in this research, refers to students' ability to relate to their knowledge as it connects to their interests (Ashwin et al., 2023). This connection was initially captured by Lora and Carl whose reflections positively showcase the opportunities to engage with theoretical knowledge in meaningful ways. In another view, the following reflections highlight what is missed when students feel they are unable to contextualize their theoretical knowledge in a meaningful way.

It's a lot of theoretical knowledge that's given, but there isn't a lot of focus on the practical… like when you are reading from the textbook you are reading "you would do this, you would fight the barriers and see the change" but more so in practice you try to work with your clients to achieve a certain goals, there are barriers, there are political/policy barriers, you can't change the system in a day. What are ways we can achieve a goal for a client in a separate way? (Jordana, social worker).

I think for the most part the curriculum is not bad, I think it's not very applied, though. Things as simple as how do we do a bio psychosocial assessment or integrate cultural competency? Like basic things that we do every single day. There is a lot of theory around it. This is why you do strengths-based theory, which is great. But how we do it, how do we move it to the practical piece? (Laura, faculty).

These reflections suggest that while the curricula can help students understand *why* theories are useful, engaging with theoretical knowledge in this manner does not necessarily prepare students for *how* to employ theory in practice. Engaging with theoretical knowledge in ways which are personally connecting to students can bridge the *why* and *how* as relationships with knowledge shifts from a general position to one that is more personal. To have general knowledge is to view the world in its most "obvious" and "external" form (Ashwin et al., 2014) or as Habermas posits "just as it is" (Habermas, 2004, p. 310). For example, Jordana's relationship to theory is external as knowledge is acquired through course readings, which takes a rather measured, controlled, and technical approach to meeting academic needs (Villalobos-Buehner, 2021). Similarly, Laura's remark about moving theoretical knowledge to the "practical" involves shifting knowledge from external to personal, placing knowledge in a disciplinary structure and situating students inside the learning process (Ashwin et al., 2014; Ashwin et al., 2022). Bridging the *why* and *how* is a process for students to relate to their knowledge as it connects to their interests, their discipline and is no longer external to them (Ashwin et al., 2022).

As such, theory not only has a strong presence in social work curricula but knowledge of theory is an important feature of social work education and practice (Trevithick, 2000). Akin to the empirical-analytical function, theoretical knowledge is fundamental to the knowing process as its predictive and law-like structure (Habermas, 1971) establishes an important baseline of understanding (Pusey, 1987). These findings highlight that engagement with theoretical knowledge is

commonly achieved through knowledge activities which qualify as more technical, including course readings, research papers, and lecture-based courses. As these approaches cater to a more cognitive process (Campbell, 2012), students engage with theoretical knowledge through more controlled, pre-determined, and measured means (Villalobos-Buehner, 2021). While these approaches are important for maintaining social work's standing as an academic discipline (Christensen et al., 2017), the ability to contextualize theoretical knowledge is beneficial for social work students and is an important feature of Habermas' theory of knowing.

Theoretical knowledge is strengthened through practice judgement, interpretation (Butler, 1997; Habermas, 1971) and when meaning and context is ascribed to it (Clement et al., 2015; Lovat, 2022). Further, the opportunity to translate theoretical knowledge to a practical means of understanding informs the process of applying theory to practice (Clement et al., 2015). This Habermasian perspective supports a more meaningful and contextualized experience which enables students to relate to their knowledge and interests (Ashwin et al., 2023) and engage students in practice opportunities. To further unpack the extent to which practice contributes to the development of social work student knowledge, the following section will examine how student some to develop their knowledge of practical skills.

5.5 Introduction to Practical Knowledge

The previous section introduced the theme *practice makes perfect* by exploring how social work students come to develop theoretical knowledge. The analysis covered the ways in which students engage with theoretical knowledge and highlighted the importance of having students explore theoretical knowledge in a manner where they personally connect to it. As this connection is optimally achieved through practice, the reciprocal relationship between knowledge engagement and practice is congruent with the theme *practice makes perfect* and will be further explored in this next section. Following suit with the previous

discussion, this analysis will explore students' relationship with practical knowledge and its role in knowledge development.

The presentation and analysis will be explored in connection to the hermeneutic cognitive interest within Habermas' theory of knowing. The hermeneutic cognitive interest concerns the contextualization of empirical-analytical understanding as it involves a process of interpretation and subjective understanding. To exercise the hermeneutic interest is to ascribe meaning (Lovat, 2004), seek a deeper level of understanding (Bernstein, 1985) and employ personal judgement (Streibel, 1991), which aligns with the subjective use of practice knowledge. To begin this analysis, the following section will explore the opportunities to develop practical knowledge from the perspective of participants.

5.6 Practice Opportunities in Social Work Education

In this research practical skills are understood as competencies which provide tangible and demonstratable outcomes (Trevithick, 2000). These skills include communication techniques, interviewing and counselling skills, treatment planning and interventions. Participants reflected on the development of these practical skills through practice opportunities in the academic environment.

I think the practice role plays there not perfect, like still coming into the hospital placement I still get nervous…but I think that just comes with practice…I hated doing roleplays at the time but now…I am seeing more and more with continuous practice you are going to get more comfortable…it gives you a safe place to make mistakes (Kevin, fourth year student).

There was a simulation and they brought in actors…I would say that course was the one that applied what I thought I was going to do in the future (Camilla, social worker).

In the classroom when there are opportunities to practice interviewing skills. That's fun to do because that's when we play with the material, we get stuck on the material, and we translate the material (Andrew, faculty).

Because of my role I work full-time [in the field], I can use a lot of practical hands-on examples, which often I think the students really feel like its applicable to their situation (Jodie, faculty).

These reflections present the shared belief that practicing knowledge in the academic environment creates a safe place for knowledge application and theoretical translation. In these instances, participants highlighted role play exercises and simulated course instruction which involve the simulation of practice scenarios with peers and hired actors. Through engagement with realistic practice scenarios, students critically examine, clarify, and consolidate new learning (Carter et al., 2018; Wrenn & Wrenn, 2009) while enhancing their practice knowledge in the process (Allemang et al., 2021). The knowledge translation fostered by practice opportunities derives from the contextualization and meaning students realize by practically engaging with their knowledge. Within the context of Habermasian theory, to exercise the hermeneutic cognitive interest is to ascribe meaning (Lovat, 2004) and realize a deeper level of understanding (Bernstein, 1985) which ultimately equips students to employ applicable forms of knowledge and personal intuition (Heinonen & Spearman, 2010; Sheppard et al., 2000; Sheppard et al., 2001; Sheppard & Ryan, 2003). When describing the hermeneutic function, Habermas (1971) posits that "access to facts is provided by the understanding of meaning, not observation" (p. 315) which is implicit in the integrative learning and continuous practice provided by in-class practice opportunities.

Participants also reflected on the application and translation of practical knowledge while engaging in field practicum. Field practicums are a widely used approach in social work education and is "universally acknowledged…as a key

feature of professional training in many countries (Domakin, 2015, p. 399). As field education has long been considered a cornerstone of social work education (Campbell, 2012; Bogo et al., 2015; Ottesen et al., 2020), it is not surprising to learn that participants felt strongly that field opportunities were pivotal to the development of practical knowledge. To illustrate, students Jules and Danielle and social worker Camilla commented on the value of "doing" while in field practicum.

I think just experience with people…like I'm a big kinesthetic learner. So, I learned by doing and being in the moment and actually experiencing things. Even though I love the textbook definition of how to counsel somebody, or what a social worker is, I would much rather experience it (Jules, third year student).

This practicum has been the closest to a job…I was a little intimidated, I was like I have no idea, I have so much to learn, but then a week later – I was able to adapt and adjust to pretty much every situation (Danielle, fourth year student).

My courses in university definitely didn't help me for practice, but I would say placement did. My second placement was in child protection.... they'll literally take their interns to do home investigations and home visits, so I feel like they kind of throw you in there. You observe how to do this once, like you're ready to do it (Camilla, social worker).

These reflections capture what can be gained when students engage directly with the learning environment. For Jules and Camilla, their practical understanding did not fully develop from the academic environment but rather, through their engagement with individuals and tasks in the learning environment. In Danielle's case, engaging in a "job like setting" allowed her to see that while she had more knowledge than previously realized, the engaged and immersive experience of field practicum helped her recognize her strengths and capabilities. Evidentially, within the process of practicing knowledge there are opportunities for

students to interact with aspects of their disciplinary knowledge. Within Habermasian theory, interaction has an important role as the hermeneutic cognitive interest centralizes students' relationship to their environment (Villalobos Buehner, 2021), reiterating the role of interaction. To expand, Jules, Camilla, and Daniella's reflections exemplify the experience of interacting with the learning environment as they highlight how these interactions foster knowledge, which is contextual, subjective, and practiced (Kondrat, 1995). The value of interaction was further captured by participants who commented on the positive impact of field supervision.

Meeting with my supervisor they would ask me specifically "so what theories are you applying in your practicum?" And I would think on my toes a little bit and look at something I did and try to fit a theory within in versus having knowledge of a theory and using my knowledge to guide my practice (Effie, third year student).

My practicum supervisors…I got to see different ways to operate clinically with personal style and training. I learned so much from all of them and took it right to hands on by leading workshops and working with clients and sitting in on meetings and clinical supervision and kind of having all of that happen, as if I was working. I wasn't but I think that my supervisors also had a lot of faith in me (Joelle, social worker).

With a good supervisor who is really asking the student to identify what they are reading about and applying it in theory in the field (Andrew, faculty).

To be guided, prompted, and encouraged in the supervisory relationship gives students the capacity to engage with their knowledge through critical reflection and constructive feedback (Roulston et al., 2018), which is established through interactions. Within the hermeneutic cognitive interest, Habermas considers interaction to be the catalyst for finding meaning, understanding, and

consensus (Habermas, 1971). The relational nature of the hermeneutic cognitive interest (Kondrat, 1995) emphasizes Habermas' thesis that meaning, and consensus is reached from the interplay among "actors in the framework of self-understanding" (Habermas, 1971, p. 316). When considered in this context, the interplay among actors can be understood as the interplay between students and field supervisors and the opportunity for students to practice their learning and find meaning while doing it.

Thus far, the research findings have highlighted the ways in which students engage with practice knowledge through in-class and field practice opportunities. These reflections support the popular notion that practicing knowledge, particularly in field education is a key contributor to the development of practical skill and knowledge (Allemang et al., 2021; Bogo, 2015). As these practice opportunities provide context for how social work students engage with practical knowledge, it is important to explore the types of skills, qualities, and knowledge gained from these practice opportunities.

5.7 Practice and the Development of Practical Knowledge

Within the student and social work groups, participants shared specific forms of the knowledge they acquired while engaging in practice opportunities.

My first-year practicum was at a group home …I did use a lot of those [practical] skills like relationship building…and then my second-year practicum was at children service under an assessor. I used my assessment skills and interviewing skills'…Like I think my practicums were my biggest learning experiences by far (Effie, third year student).

I was really fortunate with my practicum experience…I had a lot of interactions with service users… So, like I've been working in the youth sector…and sometimes that means having conflicts with some of the people who I work with. After further reflection or talking with my colleagues, I realized that I was at fault. Just addressing that with the person directly, like letting them know my

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responsibility in this, taking accountability, I feel is an important aspect of working with people, and forming meaningful working relationships with them (Betty-Anne, third year student).

The practicum courses really helped with the basics about how to conduct interviews, or intakes, how to build a rapport with clients and communicate with them effectively (Fatima, social worker).

With the practicums I saw…you must be responsive; you have to learn how to work in the mud and in the thick of things. So, I learned how to slow work down and really take my time to be meaningful and purposeful by building relationship and building competencies that can be shared (George, social worker).

A common takeaway from these reflections is the value of relational experiences. For example, Effie and Fatima highlighted the practice techniques they acquired as they engaged in rapport and relationship building while in field practicum. Comparably, Betty-Anne and George explain how practice opportunities cultivates competencies like Effie and Fatima, while also building meaningful and purposeful relationships. In these instances, interacting with others fostered the development of practice competencies fundamental to social work practice, which include, interpersonal and relational skills. Within a Habermasian context, interpersonal connection and rapport are central to hermeneutic educative approaches (Villalobos-Buehner, 2021). Interpersonal connection is strongly presented in these reflections as interaction between students, the environment, and field supervisors helps students engage more closely with their knowledge. While many of the participants commented on the value of their field practicums, this view was not universally held. When asked to reflect on the opportunity to develop practical skill, social workers Amy and Fatima commented on the variables which impacted their learning experience.

I think for me it [learning experience] definitely wasn't practicum because my practice opportunities just didn't end up being the best. I also was graduating in COVID, so, they were cut short (Amy, social worker).

No, my practicum was very difficult because I worked at this place where they had like 15 other interns at the same time, so we were fighting for work. I didn't really get to facilitate anything or do any programs or have any one-to-one time with my supervisor (Fatima, social worker).

In these instances, the limited opportunity to practice knowledge in a meaningful way impacted Amy and Fatima's ability to engage with their practical knowledge while in field practicum. This perspective is similarly expressed by faculty member Andrew who identifies a link between knowledge development and supervision.

And I think in the field placements, that's where they [students] get to practice a little bit more of the theory, although without a good solid supervisor, the connections between theory and practice tend to be missing. (Andrew, faculty)

This highlights that while field practicums may be considered a "cornerstone" of social work education (Bogo, 2015) it does not guarantee the development of a confident knowledge base. These reflections align with Ayala and Drolet (2014) position that the success of field education is contingent on the health and resources of the social services sector. The demands of the social work field can create field-related barriers which subsequently impact the learning experience of social work students. These challenges reinforce the relationship between practice and knowledge development because in the absence of practice, Amy and Fatima did not feel that field practicum supported their preparedness for professional practice. In terms of the development of practical knowledge, these findings point out a level of inconsistency as the precarious nature of the social

work field creates a lack of linearity, which compromises the standardization of practice knowledge as students are unable to develop consistent habits and rituals for their practice (Wayne et al., 2015). The notion that field placements are not always straightforward was also identified by Joubert (2017) who relays the interpersonal impact organizational culture can have on the student experiences. Specifically, the emotional and physical accessibility of an organization can impact the degree to which students are integrated, valued, and experience an overall sense of belonging. On the other hand, the complex mix of practice learning may be an accurate reflection of the dynamic and complex nature of professional practice (Ottesen et al., 2020; Tham et al., 2023) offering students a sense of the evolving and unforeseen realities of social work.

   While exposure to practice opportunities does not always translate to a positive learning experience, the relationship between practice and knowledge development is well established. The opportunities presented in this chapter while not exhaustive, are designed to equip social work students with a confident knowledge base. As noted by Cheung and Delavega (2014) practicing skills allows students to "fine-tune" their knowledge through practice drills. Additionally, practice provides a platform for students to "integrate and apply the values, knowledge, complex practices, and skills of our profession…and are socialized to think and act like a social worker" (Bogo, 2015, p. 318). These opportunities are captured by Effie, Betty-Anne, George and Fatima because through practice they polished their knowledge and professional identities (Cheung & Delavega, 2014), highlighting a noteworthy connection between practice and knowledge engagement. In other words, practice opportunities help students explore their knowledge in the context of their discipline rather than to simply develop a generic understanding (Ashwin, 2020). This is achieved as knowledge is transformed in the context of student's professional discipline and the way this connects them to the world. Building on connection, drawing attention towards the more intrinsic qualities garnered from practice will further capture how practice cultivates knowledge.

5.8 Practice Opportunities and Confidence Building

The relationship between practice and professional competency (Fortune et al., 2008) also extends to personal growth and confidence building (Bogo et al., 2017). This relationship was captured by participants from all groups as they commented on the relationship between practice opportunities and confidence building.

I think a lot of my confidence and trying things out has come from getting other perspectives. Gaining an understanding of the different ways to view the same theories and different application potentials of these theories from field placement and previous experience as well as other peoples" (Kevin, fourth year student).

Not to say I'm not nervous to start in the field, I definitely feel like there is so much to know and I feel comfortable with it in terms of my skills and abilities. However, I definitely feel more confident now that I am able to notice how I am applying it to other things without even realizing it (Cassandra, third year student).

But because we hadn't focused a lot on certain areas, I walked into my first job very apprehensive about my skills as a practitioner, especially in the first few months. I think had I had more confidence in the skills that I possessed; I wouldn't have felt this way (Clarissa, social worker).

Practice opportunities builds their [students] confidence in terms of the ability to even practice at their placement, and then come back and talk about how it went. For example, the skills of group theory, like a conflict resolution skill that they can develop the connection with the other student (Jodie, faculty).

Earlier reflections suggested that while practice does promote practical skill, it does not assure a consistent knowledge base for students. Interestingly, as it concerns personal growth, these reflections show a level of consistency in terms of the perception of confidence and its connection to practice. While it may seem platitudinous to point out that practice aids in confidence building, confidence has

been long identified as a positive outcome of social work education (Bogo et al., 2017) and is largely attributable to practice experiences. Thus, the relationship between confidence and practice emphasizes the use of 'self' when engaging with practical knowledge. In Habermasian theory, 'self' is integral to the hermeneutic cognitive interest as the nature of interpretation and application comes from an understanding which is inherently subjective and rooted in self-understanding. This connection is captured by Kevin and Nadia whose reflections link confidence to the awareness of their abilities, their understanding, and the ways in which they apply their knowledge to practice. While Clarissa commented on her lack of confidence when entering the field, when looked at retrospectively, had she had more confidence in her skill set, her readiness for practice may have been strengthened.

In the context of social work practice, the relationship between confidence and self is the ability to make practice decisions with reliable understanding of self, others, and the meaning of experiences (Kondrat, 1995). In other words, to have confidence is to have a belief in oneself and one's capabilities which according to Habermasian theory, is cultivated when students exercise the hermeneutic interest through practical engagement and interpretation of experiences (Terry, 1997). As such, the journey from theoretical knowing toward practical understanding reflects a transformative process of 'self' and knowledge which is an important feature of knowledge engagement (Ashwin et al., 2014; Ashwin et al., 2016; Ashwin et al., 2023). While engagement with practical knowledge equips students with the skills necessary to practice effectively, it is the realization and use of 'self' which fosters confidence and contributes to the developing identities as social workers (Campbell, 2012).

5.9 Summary: The Dynamic Relationship between Learning and Doing

This chapter presented and analyzed research findings which explore social work students' relationship with theoretical and practical knowledge. Emerging from this analysis are the differences in the way students engage with practical knowledge when compared to theoretical knowledge. To expand, opportunities to

engage with theoretical knowledge follow a more "talk and chalk" method (Watts and Hodgson, 2012) which emphasize the soundness of theory and logic (Williams et al., 2013) reaching students through a cognitive process of knowledge acquisition rather than contextual learning (Campbell, 2012). From this perspective, theory is seen as "out there" as its rather formal, explicit, and discursive nature is accessed through memorization, prescribed application, scholarly material, and lecture-based approaches (Kondrat, 1995; Trevithick, 2008). While this is not to suggest these approaches are ineffective as they do have their place (Trevithick, 2008; Williams et al., 2013), it does indicate that the methods used to engage with theoretical knowledge foster a distant and external relationship to theoretical knowledge which perhaps impacts student's knowledge of it. In contrast, opportunities to engage with practice knowledge takes a more applied approach through in-class integrative exercises and field education. The different forms of applied learning enables students to explore real-life challenges (Ahlfeldt et al., 2005) as students become immersed in practice realities (Blundson et al., 2003) and engage in reflexive learning from field exposure. In essence, engaging with knowledge in a meaningful way (Watts & Hodgson, 2012) creates the opportunity for students to know how as opposed to singularly focusing on objective understanding.

The theme *practice makes perfect* marks a distinction in the way students engage with theoretical and practical knowledge. This distinction emphasizes the binary that exists between theory and practice and the challenges students and social workers face with knowledge integration (Carelse & Dykes, 2014; Gray et al., 2017; Wilson & Kelly, 2010). These distinctions create a dichotomous relationship between theory and practice as different levels of engagement impact one's ability to integrate theory to practice. In other words, the meaningful connections cultivated through practice makes knowledge more relatable and reflective (Watt, 1998) whereas the distant and external relationship with theory remains to be misunderstood in practice (Fisher & Somerton, 2000). As such, the dialectical relationship between theory and practice while fundamental to social

work, is hindered by the imbalanced relationship and the different way students engage with these forms of knowledge. The differences in knowledge engagement but also illuminate the notable significance that practice has on the development of social work student knowledge. Engaging with practical knowledge enables students to bring knowledge from one context to another as they realize their identities as social workers (Campbell, 2012). The realization of one's identity reflects the concept of knowledge engagement as students experience a transformative process as they connect their knowledge to their area of study and develop a relationship to it (Ashwin et al., 2014; Ashwin et al., 2016). Further, this analysis identifies that knowledge transformation is not limited to the development of practice competencies but very much extends to the realization and use of 'self'.

The realization of 'self' is reflected by the personal growth and confidence that is developed through practice opportunities. Self-confidence reflects how individuals see themselves (Sander & Sander, 2006) and is often measured by one's success, self-efficacy, and self-esteem (Akbari & Sahibzada, 2020). A key finding from data analysis is that participants experienced a higher degree of confidence in their abilities by engaging with practical knowledge. Specifically, students not only developed a comfortability with their understanding but also recognized the value of their skills and the tasks they are learning (Fortune et al., 2005). Recognizing the value and connecting with knowledge are important aspects of knowledge engagement and transformation (Ashwin et al., 2016; Ashwin et al., 2023). In addition, the presence of 'self' was clearly identified as having a central presence through practice as the very nature of practice requires the use of 'self' in terms of judgement, interpretation, and personal intuition (Heinonen & Spearman, 2010; Sheppard et al., 2000; Sheppard et al., 2001; Sheppard & Ryan, 2003).

The notion that practice makes perfect comes from the idea that the different ways students engage with theoretical and practical knowledge impacts their relationship to it. According to Habermas (1971) access to knowledge derives from meaning and as evidenced by this analysis, meaning is cultivated

through practice as students see the value of their knowledge and develop a connection to it. This Habermasian perspective coupled with the salient take-aways from this discussion emphasize the important relationship between meaning and knowledge development, which is central to this study's second theme *the pursuit of meaning.*

Chapter Six

Findings and Discussion: Part Two

6.1 Introduction

The next two chapters will explore the themes *the pursuit of meaning* which centers around critical thinking and *know thy self* which concerns the use of self, self-reflection, and its role in professional practice. While this chapter centralizes critical thinking and chapter seven centralizes self-awareness and reflective practices, these concepts have a strong dialectical relationship commonly termed critical self-reflection. Critical self-reflection is defined by Howard (2003) as the "honest self-reflection and critique of one's own thoughts and behaviours. It requires one to seek deeper levels of self-knowledge and to acknowledge how one's own worldview can shape student's concept of self" (p. 198). Engaging in critical thought requires different uses of 'self' and the development of 'self' is realized through critical thought. While these next two chapters will present critical thinking and 'self' independent of each other, given their close connection, I felt it necessary to clarify the terminology used as both are explored through the Habermas' critical/self-reflective function.

6.2 Critical Thinking as a Pursuit of Meaning

This theme emerged as participants reflected on the ways in which critical thinking cultivates curiosity, reflection, and the pursuit of meaning. The notion that critical thinking serves as pathway toward deeper meaning is not unfamiliar to the study of social work education and practice. In related literature, critical thinking is

a process of "practical reasoning" (Mathias, 2015, p. 468), the unraveling of complexities (Hall et al., 2021), and the use of knowledge in different contexts (Boryczko, 2022). While social work educators have struggled to operationalize critical thinking (Gibbons et al., 2004) this research employs a holistic understanding of critical thinking as advanced by the Council of Social Work Education [CSWE]. Specifically, critical thinking is understood in this research as competence which is "informed by knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive, and affective processes that include…critical thinking, affective reactions, and exercise of judgement" (CSWE, 2022, p. 6). This characterization is reflected by the research findings as participants unpacked their understanding of critical thinking, the ways in which critical knowledge is constructed, and its application to professional practice.

Through this chapter, the presentation and analysis of the research findings will be explored in connection to the critical/self-reflective function within Habermas' theory of knowing. The critical/self-reflective interest is the act of engaging with other perspectives (Lovat, 2013) and promotes a form of knowing that is critically reflective of oneself, subject, and society (Grundy, 1987; Salim, 2020). As Habermas believed that the critical/self-reflective function cultivates freedom of thought, its connection to the idea that critical thinking helps social workers reason and employ professional judgement (Mathias, 2015) is worth exploring. To further examine in what way critical thinking promotes independence in the knowing process, the research findings will be explored by examining the different stages of knowledge construction.

6.3 The Development of Critical Thought: Linking the Pieces Together

Critical thinking evokes an evaluative mindset where students learn to comfortably challenge the status quo (Fenton, 2019; Gibbons & Gray, 2004) by confronting complex problems and integrate critical knowledge into practice (Verburg, 2019). While a concrete definition of critical thinking has proven to be challenging, it is vital to the development of social work student knowledge. To fully grasp the ways in which critical thought is developed is to first gain a sense of

how students understand it. Participants were asked to reflect on their understanding of critical thinking and the findings reveal connecting perceptions.

It's taking a step back and thinking about things I wouldn't normally consider. Trying to get different perspectives, I don't want to say playing the devil's advocate, but challenging my assumptions and trying to see the problem or issue or topic from different angles (Effie, third student).

To me critical thinking is being able to see any situation, problem, or person, whatever it is that you're looking at, in different lights. Being able to see that is how I view this, this is how this person views this, this is how the system views this. Just being able to look at something very holistically, which is difficult because there is going to be so many things, right? (Andie, third year student).

My interpretation kind of goes back to that puzzle situation where you are taking that scenario and you are looking at all the pieces separately. You are turning them around in your brain and you are looking at them upside down and backwards and you are wondering how they got there (Cassandra, third year student).

It's about making sure that you really analyze all of the pieces and that you're not just instantly going to the first thoughts (Daniella, fourth year student).

In these instances, critical thinking is seen as a vehicle for questioning, perspective-taking, and new ideas. The realization of difference was mutually captured by Effie and Andie as their remarks highlight that critical thought creates opportunities for "different perspectives" and "different lights". In a social work context, identifying difference through critical thought occurs as students consider the experiences of others through the examination of issues, existing assumptions,

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and differing worldviews (Gibbons & Gray, 2004; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005; Tilbury et al., 2010). To recognize and appreciate "difference" is also reflected by Cassandra and Daniella's remarks as their comments capture the experience of piecing information together. Piecing information together is a by-product of active reflection and evaluation and creates opportunities to decontextualize and reconceptualize information (Boryczko, 2022). The value of contextualization is also reflected by the research findings as participants commented on their knowledge of critical thinking with consideration of theories and concepts relevant to social work.

Critical thinking is being able to really sit back, dissect and reflect on whatever it is. Whether it be a social issue or a conflict…just really trying to sit down and figure out what is the root, what could be the cause, and what is the cause that induced this outcome (Tenisha, fourth year student).

It means to understand because I feel like if I didn't learn it [critical thinking] I just have my personal biases and wouldn't really understand the whole concept of social justice, and to know that institutional and structural racism is deeply rooted in our systems. If I didn't know that, then I just keep thinking, okay that's how it works. When they educate you, it gives you a whole new way of looking at things (Judy, third year student).

My BSW [Bachelor of Social Work] had a northern and indigenous focus. The critical thinking…was around how we conceptualize our clients, their variances, their stories, their culture and how all of that is kind of intertwined with social work… So there was a lot of critical thinking there on Western versus indigenous focus. For example, medicine, healing, how those are interwoven. So, there's a lot of critical thinking around anti oppressive practice (Joelle, social worker).

With critical theory it was great to see that there's a lot of intersections and there's a lot of me to really press and not take grand or meta narratives as they are. ⌐P⌐SEP⌐I found that with critical theory, having to understand ⌐P⌐SEP⌐the way that societies have underserved populations, the way that certain narratives or biases continue to permeate, and how to dismantle and disrupt those things. How do you create discourse? (George, social worker)

These reflections align with what the literature says about critical thinking in terms of knowledge development. The development of critical knowledge relates to a student's ability to look beyond face value information and engage in analysis and evaluation of relevant issues. In a social work context, looking beyond face value issues involves the understanding of social justice and the ability to critically engage with forces that advance position, power, privilege, and inequalities (Hall et al., 2021). Joelle's experience shares a particular congruency with this understanding as her program of study explored the differences between western and indigenous worldviews. Through the critical examination of issues and ideas (Gibbon & Gray, 2004) related to indigenous culture, Joelle developed a more practical understanding of what can be gained through critical thought and the use of anti-oppressive practices. Further, critical examination allows students to link unjust systems to the conditions which perpetuate adversity and respond to structural inequality and oppression (Fenton, 2019), which is an important feature of social work.

These linkages are exemplified by Tenisha, Judy, and George as each participant commented on the relationship between critical thinking and social justice. For Tenisha and Judy, this link understands critical thinking as a platform for knowledge-building, reflection, and the dissection of social issues with the intention of locating the root causes. For George, critical thought illuminates the intersections that perpetuate inequities for underserved populations. The specific connection George creates between critical thought and societal inequities

complements Boryczo's (2022) assertion that critical thought encourages social workers to assess the impact that injustice has on human existence.

The development of critical thought stems from adopting an evaluative mindset whereby individuals link critical understanding to complex circumstances grounded in social work (Boryczko, 2022). In social work, critical thinking serves as a basis for knowledge development as students closely engage with their disciplinary knowledge (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) and develop more meaningful accounts in the process (Ashwin, 2020). It is through meaningful engagement where students are empowered to question their existing knowledge, establish a basis for change and combine their actions with values (Boryczko, 2022; Reisch, 2013). As a concept, empowerment is central to social work practice and in this instance, the role of empowerment and action serve as a vital connector to Habermas' critical/self-reflective interest.

At the core of the critical/self-reflective function is the emancipation of the knower because as individuals engage critically with other perspectives, they engage more freely with their own (Clement et al., 2015). This freedom cultivates a sense of empowerment as it promotes action towards oneself, one's subject, and human society (Grundy, 1987; Salim, 2020). This Habermasian connection suggests that the development of critical knowledge is realized as one critically engages with inward and outward perspectives. Further, the evaluation of the world and one's place within it is vital to the development of social work student knowledge as the ongoing exploration of knowledge is an important contributor to professional practice (Konrad, 2020). It appears that the construction of critical knowledge is optimally achieved as students employ a critical lens in the context of social work as it holds deeper meaning. This perspective was further explored as participants reflected on the role of dialogue and collaboration as a means for developing critical knowledge.

I understand it [critical thinking] as something that can't be done individually. It is something where I kind of always need to reflect with other people, whether it's

with the clients, my co-workers, managers, people in my personal life, I feel like just relying on your own interpretation is problematic. (Betty-Anne, third year student).

I think it was hard to teach critical thinking in readings. So, it's more about the class discussions. So, I did enjoy that my year, my cohort, there was a lot of varied students from all walks of life and different backgrounds prior to entering social work education (Nadia, social worker).

I kind of see it as an intellectually engaged exercise which makes it possible for them [students] to interact and be skilful where they use their judgement. I try to understand them, know what their level of understanding is, and I also make mention of teamwork as an example of this. Using this they can interact amongst themselves, ask various question, exchange ideas among themselves and come up with something meaningful (David, faculty).

These reflections capture a mutual view that interaction is a valuable contributor to the development of critical knowledge. For instance, both Betty-Anne and Nadia remark on the value of interaction as Betty-Anne comments on the benefits of reflecting with others while Nadia comments on the ways in which class discussions allowed her to explore a "varied" student base. These comments complement the view that peer-to-peer interaction can promote critical thinking as it creates opportunities to assert, challenge, and justify points of view (Anderson et al., 2001). This is further supported by David as his teaching approach involves collaboration amongst peers. Specifically, David cites "teamwork" as being an effective tool for promoting interaction, questioning, and the production of meaningful exchanges. In Habermas' view, interacting with others is at the core of the critical/self-reflective function because to experience freedom in one's perspective then one must first critically engage with the perspective of others (Clement et al., 2015; Lovat 2013; Lovat, 2022). The value of contextualizing

critical thinking is further demonstrated as social workers and faculty expand on the relationship between critical thought and meaning making.

6.4 Developing Critical Thought: A Meaning-Making Experience

Since Seelig (1991) claimed that critical thinking best captures the ways in which social workers "ought to think" (p. 21), it is popularly used to describe the process of decision making in social work (Mathias, 2015). Thus far, the research findings have highlighted how the development of critical thought is initiated through perspective taking, empowerment, and interaction. These findings complement Seelig's perspective that critical thinking teaches social workers how to think as participants reflected on their ability to link their knowledge to broader social issues, interact with varied perspectives and feel empowered in the process. A further area of inquiry is to consider the aspects of critical thinking that inform the thinking process. In other words, what is realized by thinking critically and what contributes to the empowerment experienced as one makes sense of their critical knowledge? One consideration is the meaning derived from this process as social workers apply their critical understanding to issues which are relevant, purposeful, and meaningful to them. To further explore this idea, the following reflections unpack the role of meaning-making in the development and demonstration of critical thinking.

It's that most people feel that social work is about the theory and then you just go out and discharge certain duties the way you've been given. But social work is more about critical thinking, especially when it has to do with handling people that don't understand things the way you understand. It's all about how people think about it, it's all about the output to solve it the way you want it to be. Especially with mental health cases, you really need to know how to navigate around them to make them, and that's where the critical thinking comes into existence. Also, the things you see in the field is not the things you've been taught in the classroom.

So, most of the time you need to use your common sense to work around it (Timothy, faculty).

Critical thinking is required to help people solve problems, but also to understand where they're coming from. Critical thinking involves looking at someone who has a disability and finding out how it affects them, and how it affects the people around them, their family, their friends, the people they're working with, were the people who were trying to help them (Justin, faculty).

We have a lot of discussions in our class, I really strive for them [students] to think about what they're doing and kind of why they do it. Connecting with our social work values and trying to really think critically about the impact that we can make on people, our words, and actions. So, my addiction and mental health class is a blended learning and it's a lot of discussions. I am posing questions to get them to think critically around addiction, to dig a little bit deeper, such as have you ever thought about this? What about this perspective? And then I get them to think a little bit in more depth (Jodie, faculty).

These comments were in response to questions surrounding the development and demonstration of critical thought. While each participant shared unique examples, these remarks illustrate the connected view that critical thinking skills are cultivated when contextualized and ascribed meaning to social work. In this research, meaningful application is borrowed from Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation which is founded on the idea that learning is bounded by individuals' frames of reference (Taylor, 2000). A learner's frame of reference is synonymous with learner experience as it involves the application and consideration of individual interpretations and the meaning of interpretations (Calleja, 2014). Using the perspectives provided, participants shared their interpretation of critical thought by drawing connections to practice issues that fall within their own frame of reference. For Timothy this involves equipping social

work students with the critical skills to navigate vulnerable circumstances such as mental health. For Justin, critical thinking is a holistic evaluation and problem-solving technique used to deconstruct the complexities of issues such as living with a disability. For Jodie, it involves asking pertinent questions surrounding broader social issues such as addiction studies. Practice issues such as mental health, disability, and addiction are considered "value-laden" content given its relevance to social work practice. From a knowledge perspective, the use of "value-laden" content in the academic environment is believed to foster transformative learning (Taylor, 2000) which is realized as students identify the purpose, relevance, and overall meaning of their learning.

Applying critical thought to related practice issues supports students with transforming their knowledge to practice as they come to establish a working knowledge base relevant to their field of study (Coleman et al., 2002). Returning to empowerment, to practically employ critical thought through a disciplinary lens helps students recognize the unjust ideologies which permeate daily situations and practice (Kondrat, 1995). In doing so, criticality is normalized as students dissect critical concepts present in practice and through engaged learning opportunities, learn to comfortably ascribe meaning to their decisions (Hall et al., 2021). To further explore the role of meaning and engagement in the development of critical thought, the following reflections highlight some of the challenges faced when meaning is lost when teaching critical thinking.

Definitely being able to do things like role plays or fake scenarios its nice, It's definitely nice, but when they start to all bleed into each other and go into the same repetitive story, it loses its meaning. I would say practical application in my own personal life has been the best way for me to learn and apply the critical theory perspective (Cassandra, third year student).

That one [critical thinking] I find takes a little bit of practice and it sounds silly to say that, but I think in universities we teach critical thinking in a very textbook kind

of way. So, you can learn a lot but when you try to then apply those things to the real world, when maybe it's not the exact scenario that you learn about in a textbook, I think it does make it more difficult to kind of actually get to that level of thinking (Lora, faculty).

Overall, it's lacking unfortunately. It's about rubrics and lot of perseverating on marks and not critical thinking anymore. So, there's a lot of regurgitating, which is unfortunate because how are students going to think when they are dealing with a community? They can't and they won't be able to do it (Deborah, faculty).

Critical thinking, we're not working within the box and I find that a lot of times social work curriculum they put a box to say that, well, we get to this point and this is where you should be or, we get to this point and this is how it should feel. But when you're working with people and they have so many layers, how to work outside that box, how to help them also feel confident that they're navigating things in a positive way, in a way that is helping them so that they feel that it's meaningful work for them as well. (George, social worker).

These perspectives suggest that the development of critical knowledge is disrupted when there are limited opportunities to engage meaningfully with knowledge. For Cassandra, disruption occurs because of the redundancy in learning opportunities as it compromises the meaning generated from structured assessments. Similarly, Deborah's comment suggests the emphasis placed on academic merit impacts the development of critical knowledge as focus is placed on grade attainment rather than critical engagement with knowledge. These perspectives are not unlike Lora's assertion that critical thinking is taught in a "textbook kind of way" which limits the opportunity to exercise one's frame of reference or lived experience when learning to think critically. To elaborate on the faculty perspective, Deborah's view that critical thinking is lacking due to an emphasis on academic merit and Lora's view that critical thinking takes practice

are illustrative of the challenges faced when meaning is lost in the development of critical thought.

To optimize the use of one's frame of reference in the development of critical thought, it is noted that experiential activities help foster meaning-making as it allows students to experience learning more directly and find more relevance and meaning in the process (Taylor, 2000). In the absence of these opportunities, social work students may struggle to translate their critical knowledge to practice which is a view echoed by George. His remarks highlight the disconnect between the critical thinking experienced in education and the critical thinking utilized in practice. Specifically, George notes within the curricula, critical thinking is placed within a "box" whereas in practice, critical thinking is far more complex and multifaceted. These observations complement an emerging trend in social work education which is to move away from assessing critical thinking as a "targeted ability" and to see it more "as a way of being, a way of orienting, a way of applying" (Hall et al., 2021, p. 235). To link critical knowledge to a way of "being" is to acknowledge the importance of 'self' and the use of 'self' in the knowing process, which falls within Habermasian theory.

Habermas (1973) believed that to experience the freedom of knowledge impelled by the critical/self-reflective function, then one must participate in the truest form of self-reflection. This use of 'self' affirms the importance of meaning when engaging in critical thought because to make well-informed practice decisions is to integrate into practice one's understanding of 'self' and the meaning of experiences (Kondrat, 1995). This perspective complements a position defended in the previous chapter, which is that students engage more closely with knowledge in practical circumstances. This is experienced as the meaning of knowledge is realized through practice which awakens a relatable and reflexive knowledge base (Watt, 1998). Further, this awakening is akin to the transformation students experience as they engage with knowledge that is embedded in their discipline and changes their understanding of 'self' and the world (Ashwin, 2020). In essence, the research findings suggests that the

development of critical knowledge is optimally realized through practical consideration as it creates space for meaning in practice. As this occurs, students are better equipped to transfer knowledge to different contexts (Boryczko, 2022) informing their ability to take action in practice.

6.5 Critical Thinking: Practical Action for Good

Thus far, the research findings have illustrated that the development of critical knowledge stems from the ability to "unravel perplexity" (Hall et al., 2021, p. 227) through a process of questioning, reflecting and "linking the pieces" together. These findings have also illustrated the importance of finding meaning in knowledge as critical knowledge is realized as students link their critical thought with issues and concepts related to social work. This final section captures the translation of critical knowledge to practice which is understood in Habermasian terms as "practical action for good". To illustrate the use of critical knowledge in professional practice, social work participants were asked to comment on its use and utility to their work.

I use it [critical thinking] all the time. My clients have behaviors that I don't always know where they're coming from, I don't always understand the need behind it or the purpose that they have for it. That curiosity part is really important when working with clients to really figure out because if you don't ask questions, and you can't meet your client's needs, and that's kind of why you're why you're there, right? It's to help your clients and so if you're not analyzing or thinking about and asking questions about why they respond the way that they do, then you can't find out ways to better help them (Clarissa, social worker).

Because of the population I work with, I find that a lot of the time I really have to dig into the stories and think about, if they're saying this, but they have this as a diagnosis, is that really what they mean? Or how can I think about this in a different way? Or can I find out by asking different questions? I think that's critically what I think about a lot. I also think about what the best practice for some of my

patients is. Just because you have to think so deeply about everything they're going through (Amy, social worker).

Where I had to employ critical thinking was figuring out how to relate [to my clients]. Once I figured that out…and as I come into the helping relationship, I've learned what makes them tick…I've learned how to approach things. So, you know… the critical thinking is to figure out the best ways of supporting clients (Carl, social worker).

These reflections capture the application of critical thought in practice settings. For Clarissa and Amy, criticality is employed in the form of assessing, question asking, and evaluating information beyond face-value presentation. This shared process illustrates critical thinking in practice as Clarissa and Amy approach their practice using an evaluative lens by exploring meaning, options, and outcomes of their actions (Gibbons & Gray, 2004). In these instances, Clarissa and Amy employed this critical approach to determine the most appropriate course of action when supporting individual clients. Similarly, Carl employs a level of examination in practice, though, his is geared more towards an examination of self in relation to his client. This too reflects the fundamentals of critical thought as Carl leans into his own self-awareness for the purposes of relating and meeting the unique needs of clients. This application complements the practice of "self-evaluation and assessment" as critical social workers are expected to consider their own values and experiences in relation to their clients (Boryczko, 2022; Gibbons & Gray, 2004). The approaches taken by Clarissa, Amy, and Carl while similar in terms of employing a critical lens, exemplify the subjective use of professional judgement and the practice decisions made based on disciplinary knowledge (Mathias, 2015). Employing professional judgement is the process of taking action as decisions are made in response to client needs, which reaffirms the role critical thinking has when creating necessary links between theory and practice (Boryczko, 2022).

Through a Habermasian lens, professional judgement can be characterized as "practical action for change" as the knowledge gained from self-reflexivity becomes a motivator for action (Clement et al., 2015; Lovat, 2013). Habermas' critical/self-reflective function leads to practical action because of the emphasis placed on free and independent knowledge. To elaborate, free and independent knowing is understood in Habermasian terms as emancipation where individuals come to trust themselves enough to make decisions and transform their knowledge in familiar and unfamiliar contexts (Gray & Lovat, 2008; Lovat, 2013). As critical thinking is the process of transforming and applying knowledge (Boryczko, 2022) then the critical/self-reflective is reflective of its use in practice by illustrating the ways in which social workers become free in their own thinking, judgement, and points of view (Lovat 2013; Lovat, 2022).

6.6 Summary: The Pursuit of Meaning

This chapter presented and analyzed research findings which explore critical knowledge and the role of meaning in knowledge development. Meaningful learning can be understood as learning which is useful to real life circumstances (Gibbons & Gray, 2004) and based on these findings, social work students most effectively ascribe meaning through interaction, practice, and the contextualization of critical inquiry. Participants in all groups commented on the role that interaction, dialogue and perspective-taking has on the development of critical knowledge, citing its valuable contribution to their understanding. The value of interaction is highlighted in the literature as interactive environments creates space for students to connect critical thought to practice in various contexts (Boryczko, 2022). Maximizing opportunities for students to contextualize critical thinking through interaction and practice helps students comfortably assess and evaluate the field's most complex and ambiguous issues (Coleman et al., 2002). It appears the value of contextualization had a strong presence in the research findings as participants reflected on their critical knowledge through the lens of social work fundamentals, values, and theories.

Throughout the analysis, participant reflections illustrated critical thinking and its role in identifying issues related to social justice, inequality, intersectionality, and practical social work problems. Additionally, participants reflected on the need for increased practical and applied learning opportunities to create more opportunities for students to ascribe meaning to practice. These findings support that contextualizing critical understanding promotes examination and assessment (Gibbons & Gray, 2004) by normalizing big picture thinking in social work. The connection between critical thinking and meaning-making is a relationship that can be explained through Habermasian theory. The significance of the critical/self-reflective interest is emancipatory knowledge (Habermas, 1966; Habermas, 1973) and how 'self' leads to emancipation. In terms of knowledge development, 'self' is a reflective process whereby individuals examine and confront their views in relation to other perspectives. It is through this process of 'self' where individualized knowledge is embraced, and individuals develop confidence in their knowledge (Lovat, 2022). Implicit in the journey towards emancipation is critical thinking as it is through the exploration of 'self' in relation to others that individuals come to develop a critically informed way of knowing towards others and human society (Grundy, 1987; Salim, 2020).

To conclude this section, I will expand on a final key takeaway from this analysis which are the ways in which critical thinking informs professional social work practice. Participant reflections illustrated the use of professional judgement through the assessment and evaluation of practice situations as well as the role of 'self-reflection' in the helping relationship. These perspectives exemplify how disciplined evaluation and thoughtful practice (Gibbons & Gray, 2004) cultivate a readiness to question all assumptions and pertinent information (Coleman et al., 2002). These applications connect critical thought to Habermas' critical/self-reflective function in terms of the translation of critical thought to professional practice. To expand, practical action for good is the outcome of Habermas' critical/self-reflective interest as actions are taken based on individual knowledge (Clement et al., 2015; Lovat, 2013) which stems from having the confidence and

freedom to make decisions. Having also been referred to as "critique-in-action", critical thinking is an important connector between theory and practice (Coleman et al., 2002) as students move from knowledge acquisition to the critical examination and engagement with discipline specific knowledge (Gibbons & Gray, 2004). Interestingly, the significance of critical thought to social work student knowledge is akin to the significance of the critical/self-reflective function in Habermas' theory of knowing. Specifically, Habermas notes that the critical/self-reflective function carries the most weight as this function is the pathway toward a complete and comprehensive way of knowing (Lovat et al., 2004; Lovat, 2013; Quong, 2003). Based on the research findings, it appears that critical knowledge carries a comparable level of weight as it may be the knowledge needed to bridge the well-known knowledge-practice gap.

Chapter Seven

Findings and Discussion: Part Three

7.1 Introduction

This chapter covers the theme *know thy self* which centers around self, self-reflection, and its use in professional social work practice. This theme emerged as participants discussed the construction of 'self' through awareness building, reflective practice, and its use and utility in social work practice. As will be examined, 'self' and the value of engaging in self-reflective practice is well-documented in social work literature (Ferguson, 2018; Rosen et al., 2017; Sicora, 2010) resulting in varying interpretations and applications. Specifically, 'self' is often examined in terms of reflective and reflexive practice and while these terms have subtle distinctions, they mutually contribute to the development of 'self'. As

both reflective and reflexive practices were present in the research findings this chapter will begin with a brief overview of these concepts as it relates to this research.

In social work discourse, reflection is commonly linked to the use of 'self' because to be reflective is to explore issues, individual experiences, and to interpret experiences with consideration of 'self' and individual worldviews (Ferguson, 2018; Man Lam et al., 2007). In practice, this process connects individual thoughts to action as reflection increases self- awareness in relation and response to the approaches taken in social work settings. In a slight contrast, reflexivity is the renewal of one's approach, position, and worldview (Man Lam et al., 2007) which follows the process of engaging in reflective practice. In a sense, reflexivity is a form of personal evaluation as it involves the critical analysis of the knowledge and assumptions that inform how social workers make sense of practice decisions (Taylor & White, 2000). To describe these concepts as a process, reflection can be understood as reflection-on-action as individuals reflect on specific practice situations in terms of actions, emotions, and its potential impact in practice (Ide & Beddoe, 2024). Reflexivity can be understood as reflection-in-action which is the application of the self-awareness garnered from reflection and its role in strengthening and growing practice decisions (Ide & Beddoe, 2024). In essence, reflection is a process of introspection and reflexivity is the ongoing application of the awareness realized from introspection. As participants were not asked to comment on the distinction between reflective and reflexive practice, this research defines self-reflection as a process of reflective and reflexive practice given the mutual contribution to the development of 'self' in practice. To explore the presence of 'self' in the development of social work student knowledge, the findings presented in this next section will explore participants understanding of 'self' by unpacking the development of 'self' in social work education, how this manifest in professional practice, and its contribution to preparedness.

Akin to the previous chapter, the presentation and analysis of the research findings will be explored in connection to Habermas' critical/self-reflective function. As previously mentioned, at the core of the critical/self-reflective function is emancipatory knowledge which is to reach freedom in one's thinking, judgement, and points of view (Lovat, 2013; Lovat, 2022). To achieve emancipation is to adopt a critically evaluative mindset whereby knowers engage with other perspectives, areas of study, and society to achieve freedom in one's perspective (Clement et al., 2015; Grundy, 1987; Salim, 2020). This process is inextricably linked to 'self' because to achieve autonomy in one's knowing is to be reflective and examine one's world for the purposes of "knowing the knower" (Lovat, 2013). Within Habermasian theory, the critical/self-reflective function is the creator of action as knowers develop the agency to use their knowledge in familiar and unfamiliar contexts (Lovat, 2013). This perspective draws an important parallel to the use and utility of 'self' within social work because for social workers to build bridges between theory and practice than they are required to participate in the ongoing implementation of reflective practice (Sicora, 2010). As such, this final theme will explore the ways in which *knowing thy self* is a key contributor to social work student preparedness and this discussion will begin by exploring how students come to develop their knowledge of 'self'.

7.2 The Construction of 'Self' in social work education

The construction of 'self' relates closely to self-awareness given its connection to professional identify and the continuous examination of personal values and practices (Blakemore & Agllias, 2018). To be self-aware is to engage in reflective practices, unpack worldviews, and put awareness into action. As the literature acknowledges the value of having students engage in reflective practices in the learning environment (Furman et al., 2008), participants were asked to reflect on aspects of their education which informed their understanding of 'self' and self-reflective practices.

It [education] taught me a lot of self-reflection. My own social location, my own biases, why I think the way I think and how I can change. I learned that in my indigenous class or when I learn about the black community and their history. A lot of how we can learn and do things differently and how I can approach people in their communities. I do reflect on my own background, how I was raised, my values, and how I cannot impose those on other people. I do reflect when I am meeting face-to-face with people (Kelly, social worker).

I took a sexual diversity and contemporary society course…I thought that was really interesting and eye opening to really dive into and understand the different intersectionality's that the 2SLTGBTQ + community face. I think that course just really asks the question like how do you bring across what you do? It just really opened up a lot for me in terms of understanding, being compassionate and being able to understand if I were to come across a client that identified with any of those communities (Tenisha, fourth year student).

When I was in my BSW I really liked learning more hands on. We went to this indigenous led healing centre for addictions and it had me think about how these individuals really integrate nature and the world into their healing. We had the privilege of being allowed into a smudging ceremony and learning firsthand from these people (Joelle, social worker).

In these instances, participants commented on aspects of their education which contributed to the development of 'self'. While self-awareness is a subjective experience, common across these reflections are the ways in which learning about others promotes a self-reflective process. For Kelly, courses that explored the experiences of indigenous and racialized communities created opportunities to consider her own lived experiences in terms of her positioning, biases, and lived experiences. Kelly's reflective process can be understood as "looking backward" which is the reflection of past experiences and the ways in which such experiences influence thoughts, beliefs, and behaviours (Dempsey et al., 2001).

Self-awareness was similarly cultivated for Teneisha when learning about the experiences and intersectionality's which impact the 2SLGBTQ + population. In this case, Tenisha's awareness is closely connected to feeling compassion and empathy towards others and how this knowledge may inform her practice decisions. Tenisha's experience exemplifies a "looking outward" reflective process which is when worldviews are broadened as individuals learn about the experiences and meanings experienced by others (Dempsey et al., 2001). In a more experiential capacity, Joelle's engagement with indigenous communities increased her awareness through a "socially situated" experience (Man Lam et al., 2007). This integrated learning experience is important for adopting reflective practices as students explore their awareness in the context of practice engagement which increases sensitivity to one's own self-awareness (Man Lam et al., 2007).

While these reflections are unique to Kelly, Tenisha, and Joelle, they mutually demonstrate that self-awareness is garnered when connected to others. In addition to learning about others, self-reflection also encourages students to look inward and connect new knowledge to themselves and their role in practice. This reflective process can be understood as cultural humility which through self-reflective practices and critique of biases, students recognize factors and assumptions that impact practice and are transformed in the process (Rosen et al., 2017). This awareness is a measure of competent social work practice and resonates with the Habermasian view that the awareness of one's own moral consciousness (Terry 1997) is advanced through critical self-reflection. Specifically, the critical/self-reflective function is the intensive critique of assumptions and points of knowing (Lovat, 2013) born from engaging in reflective processes involving oneself and larger society (Grundy, 1987; Salim, 2020). As self-reflection is an exercise of inquiry and evaluation, engaging and dialoguing with others is paramount, a view also captured by the research findings.

I would say a lot of the discussions in class, whether they were lectured, planned, or spontaneous helped me reflect. I've had a lot of amazing professors who really loved participation, collaboration, and communication. Even just conversations I have with peers… we'd like to debrief together and just really talk about the world and what we see around us. I used to get that from practicum seminar and when you get that feedback, you locate yourself in the experiences of others, especially when we talk about our learning and how we are developing (Jules, third year student).

The courses where we had role playing and mock interviews is where I felt I could reflect and really tie things together. My teacher did an excellent job of teaching the course, it didn't sound like recycling with the same lesson plans or just reading the literature that we're already kind of required to read. She did a good job with giving real life scenarios and discussions…it really helped me put my learning together (Betty-Anne, third year student).

Group discussions during class really helped, mostly my indigenous courses were very much like group discussions. I learned a lot from peers more than in class setting because indigenous courses you sit in a circle. It allows you to feel open when you talk cause when you're in a regular classroom setting, it's like everyone is standardized, you can't really see the people around you (Judy, third year student).

These reflections capture the role dialogue and interpersonal connection has on the development of 'self' in the academic environment. Jules and Judy have mutually benefited from learning environments that provide opportunities to engage, dialogue, and share experiences with peers in the classroom. For Jules, this benefit came from collaboration and communication about issues and experiences that went beyond the course content. For Judy, the physical setup of the classroom created a dynamic that fostered openness and dialogic exchanges in the learning environment. Dempsey and colleagues (2001) note that expression

of feelings and dialogic exchanges promote self-awareness as knowledge acquisition goes beyond the intellectual and towards a meaning-making and reflective experience. Additionally, the fluidity of dialogue appropriately accounts for the interplay between student experience and the organic opportunities which are said to help students employ their reflection critically (Man Lam et al., 2007). In Betty-Anne's case, it was her professor and the dynamic of the learning environment which created opportunities for Betty-Anne to tie herself to the content in the course. Specifically, the use of role plays, and mock interviews created space for experiential reflection to appropriately influence "the growing professional self" (Man Lam et al., 2007, p. 102). Further, both Betty-Anne and Jules credit their professors for the opportunity to engage in self-reflective practices and develop themselves in the process. This is complementary of the relationship between reflection and mentorship (Harris ,1996) as it is posited that teachers can positively influence the dialogue amongst learners (Dempsey et al., 2001). In doing so, students come to appreciate the feedback offered through all forms of dialogue which further emulates the notion that reflection is not always a siloed practice (Sicora, 2010).

The interaction fostered by peer-to-peer dialogue, collaborative professors, and experiential exercises has an influential part to play in the development of 'self'. The importance of interaction falls well within Habermasian theory as Habermas (1973) posits that it is through interaction where meaning, understanding, and consensus can be found. While interaction is emphasized in Habermas' hermeneutic cognitive interest, it forms a necessary foundation for the critical/self-reflection function. To expand, it is through the interaction with the external world and the examination of all sources of knowing (Lovat, 2013) where individuals come to engage in the truest form of self-reflection. In an educational context, the critical/self-reflective function is supportive of the teacher influence because for 'self' to be actualized then critical reflection needs to be present. Particularly, it is noted that teachers are instrumental with helping students develop a critical consciousness and to be aware of and prepared to socially

reconstruct their knowledge, beliefs, and practices (Butler, 1997). This sentiment is usefully captured by Jodie who reflects on her approach to promoting 'self' through reflective practices:

In class I always state that you [students] have your own personal experience and this is a brave space so feel free to share them. I think students are quite vulnerable in terms of they're talking, sharing and reflecting on their own experiences, so I try and encourage this in class (Jodie, faculty).

As reflected by Jodie, the interaction between 'self' and the learning environment is both dynamic and reflective as it helps shape individual identities (Rosen et al., 2017). In this case, reflection occurs through the sharing of personal experiences and finding meaning in those experiences (Cheung & Delavega, 2014), aligning with the Habermasian view that there is no knowing without the knower (Lovat, 2013). Further, coming to learn about the experiences of others through collaboration and engaged learning opportunities supports the view that 'self' is realized through dialogue with others (Caddigan & Pozzuto, 2008). Understanding how students develop self-awareness provides a useful foundation of how 'self' and reflective practices manifest in professional practice.

7.3 The Use of 'Self' in Professional Social Work Practice

The notable presence of 'self' and use of reflection is not entirely surprising given the literature's view that 'self' is an important "instrument" (Cheung & Delavega, 2014, p. 1070) and influencer for social work practice (Caddigan & Pozzuto, 2008). This relationship was captured by participants as they responded to questions concerning the use of 'self-reflection' in practice settings.

I ask myself what could I have done differently in the situation? What could I say next time if that happens again? I find I'm thinking about it before I sleep or when I'm commuting, and I reflect on what should I have done differently or what I wanted to do (Judy, social worker).

In terms of how I do it [self-reflection] is before every session I take minutes to reflect on the past experiences of my client, I might review notes, intake forms…what the work was. After the session I also reflect on how I showed up in that session for my clients. So, kind of a bit of a checklist in my mind, I guess. Did I use enough? Did I validate them enough? Was I feeling triggered at any part of my practice? How can I show up differently the next time? (Joelle, social worker).

In these instances, participants use self-reflection to examine and critically appraise their approaches used in practice. These evaluative approaches are important to reflexive practice because of the involved process of critically examining one's practice and feeling empowered to make change (Sicora, 2010). Reflecting on one's professional identity falls within best-practice approaches to social work because it is through self-awareness where practitioners learn to be ethical and effective in their practice while also connecting to their emotional selves (Ferguson, 2018). Connecting with the emotional self was highlighted by Joelle byway of evaluating her triggers and was further captured by reflections offered by Kevin and George.

I think [self-reflection] is for developing a professional self as well as using it as a tool to gauge where I'm at personally. Whether I'm feeling like I need a bit more self-care, if I feel like I am having a rough day, all my assessments went poorly…I've been more intentional with doing that self-reflection piece to and from work. We learn about the ideas of burnout and vicarious trauma, these big career ending things for social workers (Kevin, fourth year student).

Self-reflection…I realized that it's very good to do the decompressing. It's very good to make sure that you look at your work and that you see how to serve humanity. Is that informing your practice? Is it helping you shape your identity as a social worker as a being? Can you account for all of these things? I find that it's

good because it's easy to always pour it to somebody else, but they have to also see how are you pouring into yourself? What is it that you're learning? How are you navigating your day to day with the practice of social work? So, sometimes I don't get the opportunity to and I realized…I lose my voice and I also lose my passion for the work. It helps with grounding and grounding is so important because then you don't lose yourself in the ebb and flow, you find a way how to be purposeful and add meaning to the work that you're doing (George, social worker).

These examples of self-reflection draw important attention to the versions of 'self' which reach beyond the professional aspects of practice and target the emotional self. The emotional self is key for social workers to identify and understand their emotional states to ensure they comfortably respond to client experiences (Ferguson, 2018). For Kevin, using self-reflection to gauge his personal well-being and to safeguard against burnout acknowledges the emotional intrusiveness of social work and the benefit of engaging with 'self' to address the emotional impact (Greene, 2017). Similarly, George's use of self-reflection is seen as a tool to decompress, ground practice, and to examine the influence that 'self' has on his identity as a social worker. In this instance, the manifestation of self-reflection in George's practice recognizes the complexities of 'self' which includes one's emotional self and the ways in which it affects one's thinking (Ferguson, 2018). Additionally, these reflections address the link between self-awareness and the ways in which reflection builds competency, self-regulates, and serve as "a basic cornerstone for the development of the professional self" (Urdang, 2010, p. 536). While 'self' is a persona unique to everyone (Ferguson, 2018) what is common across these findings is the use of 'self' in practice situations and the manner in which reflective practices cultivates introspection, self-awareness, and empowerment.

The relationship between 'self' and empowerment can be explained by the insight gained when engaging in self-reflective practices. Specifically, it is through reflective activities where social workers are empowered to enhance their practice

and use their knowledge to produce meaningful change (Sicora, 2010), a sentiment similarly shared in Habermasian theory. By Field's (2018) account, the critical/self-reflective function refers to "the innate interest in freedom, autonomy, and responsibility, resulting…in our efforts to understand injustice, power relations, and the beliefs and values that constrain us" (p. 256). Further, through the lens of Habermasian theory, empowerment looks for clarity, rationality, and action which stems from practitioner's understanding of self and the way practice is shaped (Kondrat, 1995). This Habermasian perspective suggests that emancipation stems from a critical appraisal and examination of one's life and the external and internal forces which shape knowledge (Lovat, 2013). This perspective is part and parcel with the self-reflection advanced in social work as these practices promote competency through the evaluation of individual biases (Rosen et al., 2017) and through the critical review of one's role, purpose, and worldviews (Man Lam et al., 2007). In other words, it is the knowledge of 'self' realized through reflection where freedom is reached as social workers are empowered to employ and trust their knowledge and use of 'self' in practice.

7.4 Trusting Thy 'Self' in Professional Practice

Thus far, this thesis has examined the development and use of theoretical, practical, and critical knowledge among undergraduate social work students. This chapter has extended the discussion of knowing by examining the development of 'self' and its role in professional social work practice. This final section considers the role 'self' has on a social worker's ability to employ theoretical, practical, and critical knowledge following a confident and intuitive process. In social work literature, this is a concept known as practice wisdom which among its many interpretations, is generally viewed as knowledge that is intuitive, personal, (DeRoos, 1990; Scott, 1990) and the integration of knowledge, insight, skills, and values (Goldstein, 1990). The use of 'self' and reflection are embedded in practice wisdom as it requires social workers to recognize the extent of their knowledge, limits to their knowledge, and to acknowledge when more understanding is needed. This appraisal process is the use of 'self' in practice as it requires

humility, self-reflection (Cheung, 2015) and an understanding of the personal values which generate knowledge and where new knowledge is to be found (Thompson & Pascal, 2012). In this research, the connection between 'self' and practice wisdom emerged organically from the findings as participants regularly commented on intuition when asked about their use of knowledge and skill in professional practice.

It's just a lot of instinctual nature and I've learned about how instinct and trusting yourself is just as big of the part of social work… I was talking to my supervisor about how I didn't feel like I was consciously aware of implementing social work practice skills…but then you reflect and realize that you are. I just thought that I had to be more mindfully engaged when I was doing it (Jules fourth year, student).

I think you start learning all this stuff and it kind of just gets stored you. I could be doing something and not even realize that I'm pulling theory. I think it just gets so engrained into your head then you start pulling things out that you may not necessarily remember that I learned this in this class at this time and it applies to this principle, but you are still doing it. it becomes more of an instinct than looking into your library of theoretical practices (Cassandra, third year student).

More frequently than not, it is an intuitive process… I apply it intuitively unless there are complicating factors and it becomes more cerebral and planned, and if I run into any difficulties, then I seek outside assistance (Tyler, fourth year student).

Intuition was also highlighted by social workers when asked about their use of knowledge and skills professional practice.

It's a lot more intuitive… so, when clients are presenting as depressed or anxious… it's really about learning about their life, their past, where they grew up

from, what their current stressors are and then you begin to formulate your case (Nadia, social worker).

I feel like when you're practicing you go with the flow, and you do it without realizing that you're doing it. I'm learning more and more how intuitive our field is, as opposed to prescriptive. It's not robotic, like you shouldn't have to follow a certain script, it should be natural (Camilla, social worker).

It's funny, it's almost, it's a little bit intuitive, but also, I, I believe that some theories work better than others… It depends on what capacity you have in the role, how long you have been working with your client, and what your plan is (George, social worker).

Clearly captured by these comments is the use and presence of intuition when making practice decisions. For Jules, Cassandra, and Camilla, intuition is manifested more at the unconscious level where participants understand the application of their knowledge, however, there isn't a conscious understanding of the type of knowledge being used. For Jules, this involves learning to trust the implementation of practice skills, for Cassandra it is a process of working with engrained understanding and for Camilla, intuition is more of an organic or free-flowing process as opposed to a prescriptive one. In these instances, intuition manifests at the unconscious level where awareness or access to information supersedes thought or a conventional analytical process (Luoma, 1998). This approach has been otherwise termed as the "unconscious use of self" where practitioners create space for embedded knowledge using private feelings and emotional senses (Schneider & Grady, 2015).

In contrast, Tyler, Nadia, and George describe their use of knowledge as intuitive but not without a conscious degree of critical reflection and inquiry. To expand, Tyler acknowledges the strong presence of intuition in practice but only under circumstances where external consultation or more formalized ways of

knowing is necessary. Similarly, George comments on the intentional use of knowledge and finding balance between intuition and working within capacity. This is comparable to Nadia's perspective where intuitive practice is framed in response to the lives, experiences, and stories shared in practice settings. In these instances, intuition plays a key role in practice but with a higher degree of grounding through the conscious application of knowledge. For these participants, intuitive approaches are framed more systematically using critical analysis, theorization, and with the presence of logical reasoning (O'Sullivan, 2005). This may be characterized more appropriately as the "conscious use of self" whereby practitioners integrate knowledge and technique from professional training with a more personal use of 'self' (Schneider & Grady, 2015). While the explicit use of intuition in practice has been criticized for lacking critical control and justification (O'Sullivan, 2005) it is otherwise viewed as an approach that appropriately responds to the flexible and variable nature of the social work field (Director, 2007). However contested intuition may be, there is clearly a strong presence of intuition in professional social work which further highlights the use of 'self' in practice and its role in emancipating students in their role as social workers.

The strong presence of intuition reflected by the findings highlights the use of practice wisdom in professional practice. Specifically, the relationship between intuition and practice wisdom is based on the personal articulation and interplay between personal and formal knowledge (Cheung, 2015). Further, as practice wisdom promotes the use of feelings, insights, and values in practice (Luoma, 1998), the use of 'self' and integration of reflection creates space for the confident application of one's knowledge. It is in the area of 'self' and the knowledge used to trust one's intuition where practice wisdom and Habermas' critical/self-reflection function intersect. This connection has been previously identified by O'Sullivan (2005) who notes that "emancipatory forms of knowing are valued in practice wisdom for a number of reasons, but here the focus is on how these forms of knowing require and promote self-reflection" (p. 233). Further, as self-reflection, critique, and self-transformation are key tenets of emancipatory knowledge

(Burrell, 1994) through a Habermasian lens, practice wisdom can be understood as a manifestation of 'self' in practice. To expand, the use of 'self' or practice wisdom promotes a trusted and confident social worker as they learn to rely on their own knowledge when making practice decisions as they have reached the point of freedom or emancipation.

7.5 Emancipation as Preparedness

This final theme *"know thy self"* emerged because of the influence 'self' and reflective practices has on the development of social work student knowledge. In this research, 'self' was explored in relation to self-awareness, self-reflection and how knowledge of 'self' translates to professional practice. Through this examination, the findings have identified that 'self' is deeply embedded in social work and is therefore key to the development of social work student knowledge. The importance of 'self' identified in this research is not unfamiliar to related literature as it is the most cited concept in clinical work (Schneider & Grady, 2015). To regard 'self' as the greatest tool for practitioners is appropriately captured by the findings given the reflective opportunities it provides as students learn how they make sense of the world (Dempsey et al., 2001). Also captured by the findings is the way 'self' may serve as a pathway towards self-transformation and self-renewal (Burrell, 1994). This is achieved through the critical appraisal of one's approach to practice subsequently resulting in the ability to trust one's intuition and professional judgement. This process encapsulates the significance of this final theme *"know thy self"* because of the consideration and use of 'self' and its contribution to social work students' preparedness for practice.

An important capability for newly trained social workers is self-efficacy, confidence, knowledge of one's personal motives, and reflective development (Thompson & West, 2012). Central to these core capabilities is knowledge of 'self' as it serves not only as a driver for reflective practice, but without self, then the pursuit of efficacy, confidence, and personal motives would have no basis. In terms of social work student preparedness, this perspective suggests that for students to feel prepared to engage in professional practice than capability should

extend beyond "technique" (Seligson, 2004) and towards the ownership of 'self' in terms of capabilities, limitations, and the capacity for continued growth and transformation. The impact capability of self has on preparedness is akin to Habermas concept of emancipation in the critical/self-reflective function. Critical/self-reflection impels emancipatory knowledge through the truest form of 'self-reflection' (Habermas, 1973) as individuals are freed in their thinking, judgement, and points of view (Lovat, 2013; Lovat, 2022). To embrace freedom of thought is to trust one's intuitive process and to have confidence in the decisions made within the variable realities of social work (Director, 2007). The emancipation reached through the critical/self-reflective function is the capacity to transform knowledge in familiar and unfamiliar contexts (Lovat, 2013). In terms of preparedness, emancipation is reflective of the pivotal moment where students are freed as students and start their journey towards practice.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This thesis explored social work student preparedness for practice by examining the ways in which students come to develop their disciplinary social work knowledge. Through the lens of Habermas' theory of knowing, this research explored the development of theoretical, practical, and critical knowledge and how engagement with these forms of knowledge contributes to students' sense of preparedness. This research employed a qualitative methodology underpinned by an interpretivist and relativist paradigm by conducting semi-structured interviews with undergraduate social work students, newly trained social workers, and social work faculty. This research strategy allowed for the examination of the varied and unique perspectives offered by those closely connected to social work and aspects involved in the development of social work knowledge. The research findings offers an important contribution to the study of social work student preparedness, particularly as it concerns the ways in which students come to develop their disciplinary knowledge, the role of social work curricula in this process, and the aspects of knowing which best prepare students for practice. To unpack the significance of these contributions, this final chapter will address the salient take-away's by revisiting each theme in response to the related research questions.

8.2 Prelude

Before proceeding to the answering of the research questions, I would first like to address the intentional structuring of the research findings and discussions. While discussions pertaining to theoretical, practical, and critical knowledge are presented independently, the intent was to illustrate how these knowledge forms, while distinct, support the foundation for the other in terms of knowledge development. To summarize, theoretical knowledge represents students' entry point toward the understanding of social work by providing a much-needed framing of social work knowledge. Described in the literature as a lens (Trevithick, 2000)

and grounding (Chu & Tsui, 2008; McCafferty & Taylor, 2022) theoretical knowledge is the point of departure for which the practical use of techniques, interventions, and strategies are used. Without theoretical understanding, practical knowledge, which is the vehicle for tangible and demonstrable outcomes (Trevithick, 2000) would be without logic, substantiation, or evidence as to why a particular practical skill or technique is used. Conversely, without practical knowledge, theoretical knowledge would be dormant, without action, translation, or application to daily social work practices. In Habermasian terms, theoretical knowledge is without subjectivity while practical knowledge employs the knowers pre-understanding which derives from theory and relies on meaning and interpretation to facilitate communication between these forms (Habermas, 2004). The quest and application of theoretical and practical understanding (Lovat, 2022) form the basis of understanding which creates space for continued growth which is cultivated by critical thinking.

Without the foundational understanding of social work fundamentals provided by theoretical and practical knowledge, the ability to examine issues, challenge assumptions, and explore different perspectives (Gibbons & Gray, 2004; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005; Tilbury et al., 2010) would have no basis. For social work students, critical thinking is the mobilizer for decision making (Mathias, 2015) as students learn to challenge the status quo (Fenton, 2019) and build the capacity to 'think' and 'do' as social workers. As critical thinking is said to be the connector between theory and practice, it serves not only as the process of acting on one's theoretical and practical understanding, but also cultivates the use of 'self' in the knowing process. Habermas (2004) notes that critique "sets off a process of reflection" (p. 316) and within this research, 'self' is realized through theoretical, practical, and critical understanding. To expand, the realization of self occurs as students examine personal values and practices (Blakemore & Agllias, 2018), appraise and critically examine their skills (Cheung, 2015) and come to trust their capabilities using intuitive practice. As 'self' serves as the interplay between personal and formal knowledge (Cheung, 2015; Luoma, 1998) students

develop a level of awareness while engaging in reflection, which deepens their understanding, encourages the development of a confident knowledge base, and supports the shaping of professional identities.

To conclude this prelude, the structuring of this thesis is indicative of the gradual knowing process whereby the empirical interest (theory) establishes the origins of understanding, which is extended through interpretation, exploration, and the application of meaning through hermeneutic (practical) understanding. Amongst these knowledge areas, are the critical and reflective orientations which lead to emancipation (Habermas, 2004) and autonomy of the knower (Lovat, 2022). This journey towards autonomy is illustrative of what it means to "know thy self" which is reached through the foundational building blocks of theoretical, practical, and critical understanding.

8.3 How do students come to develop their theoretical knowledge?

The first research question which concerns the development of theoretical knowledge is answered by this study's first theme *practice makes perfect.* The research findings suggest that while students appreciate theory's role in professional practice, there are challenges with conceptualization (Joubert, 2017; Carelse & Dykes, 2014; Wilson & Kelly, 2010). The findings show that theory has a wide and varied reach in the curricula as participant reflections captured various accounts of theorical knowledge in terms of its presence in curricula, what qualifies as a "social work theory", and conflicting views concerning its relevance to social work practice. In terms of knowledge development, the opportunity to develop theoretical knowledge is commonly reached through cognitive processes (Campbell, 2012) such as course readings, lectured-style teaching, and written tasks. These controlled, pre-determined, and measured learning approaches (Villalobos-Buehner, 2021) while important for showcasing social work's academic merit (Christensen et al., 2017; Trevithick, 2000) are not highly valued among social work students (Roulston et al.,2018). This is evidenced by the ambivalence shown by participants as they reflected on the challenges faced with defining

theory's role in professional practice, particularly as theory effectively teaches students 'why' but fails to explain 'how' it manifests in practice settings. The prescriptive nature of theory keeps theoretical knowledge at a disciplinary distance as students view theory as an external idea rather a personal entity (Ashwin et al., 2014) suggesting an irrelevance to practice. As such, exploring theoretical knowledge out of the disciplinary structure (Ashwin et al., 2014) creates a "level of disjunction" (Wilson & Kelly, 2010, p. 2446) between students cognitive understanding and the use of theory in practice, impeding on the development of theoretical knowledge.

In a contrasting view, the usefulness of theory was articulated in the context of practice as some participants offered positive accounts of theory when constructed through personal connection and contextualization. For instance, the development of theoretical knowledge is reached through more applied and contextualized exercises such as case studies, practice-specific courses, and experiential based course assessments. As experiential learning requires greater involvement in learning, students examine the construction of ideas in the context of their professional socialization (Mulder & Dull, 2014). As such, through the application process, students are situated inside the learning process (Ashwin et al., 2022) as theoretical knowledge is contextualized within social work and in turn, becomes more personally connecting to students.

While this research clearly identified a level of variability in terms of perceptions and understanding of theoretical knowledge, this research has demonstrated that the development of theoretical knowledge is optimally reached when explored in a disciplinary context. Engaging with theoretical knowledge through a lens relevant to social work allows students to relate to their knowledge as it connects to their interests (Ashwin et al., 2023). As evidenced by these findings, the more immersive the task (Campbell, 2012), the more enthusiasm students experience as they construct their theoretical knowledge in specific learning contexts (Van Bommel et al., 2015). Constructing theoretical knowledge in specific learning contexts creates opportunity to strengthen knowledge as it

provides space to exercise judgement, interpretation, and explore meaning (Butler, 1997; Clement et al., 2015; Habermas, 1971).

In essence, students come to develop theoretical knowledge when situated inside the learning process and connect their knowledge to their interests, their discipline (Ashwin et al., 2022) and bridge the gap between why and how. The bridge between why and how can otherwise be characterized as the knowledge-practice gap which is a well-documented struggle among social work students (Joubert, 2017; Lewis & Bolzan, 2007; Van Bommel et al., 2015; Wilson & Kelly, 2010). Further, as the discourse identifies that practice learning is key to addressing the binary between theory and practice (Domakin, 2015; Ottessen et al., 2020; Teater, 2011), these findings share the value of practicing theory to promote theoretical knowledge development

8.4 How do students come to develop their knowledge of practical social work skills?

A noteworthy differentiator between student's relationship with theoretical knowledge when compared to practical knowledge is the fervour exuded as participants reflected on the development of practical knowledge. Unlike the ambivalence surrounding the development of theoretical knowledge, there was a notable level of understanding and interest across all participant groups when highlighting opportunities to engage with practical knowledge, aligning with the literature's view that social work student's value the importance of practice learning (Bogo, 2015; Campbell, 2012; Wilson & Kelly, 2010; Ottesen, 2020). In terms of knowledge development, participants highlighted various opportunities to engage with practical knowledge with a particular emphasis on experiential learning activities as such simulated course instruction, role plays, applied projects, and field education. The immersive nature of these pedagogical approaches contributes to the development of practical knowledge as students actively engage in the interworking's of their discipline. Practice helps students develop a social work mindset (Bogo, 2015) as they learn to "do" the work by actively clarifying, consolidating, and fine-tuning their knowledge (Carter et al.,

2018; Cheng & Delavega, 2014; Wrenn & Wrenn, 2009). Engaging with practical knowledge in real time serves as a platform to practice skills (Fortune et al., 2008), make mistakes (Watts & Hodgon, 2012), resolve real life practice issues (Campbell, 2012) and form professional identities (Tham et al., 2023). Indeed, through simulation, observation, interaction, and supervisory guidance, students participate in an engaged and discipline specific learning experience which contributes usefully to the development of practical knowledge.

This research has also identified that equally pivotal to the development of practical knowledge is the cultivation of confidence and personal growth. While confidence was not a universal occurrence, particularly when transitioning to professional practice, participants did acknowledge that with more practice, they may have felt more confident in their capabilities and self-understanding. This is not to suggest that practice is synonymous with confidence building, but rather, illuminates the value of engaging with practice knowledge by 'doing' and 'experiencing' and nurturing a personal connection to practical knowledge. As students come to recognize their professional competency through practice opportunities (Fortune et al., 2008), they develop a capacity and understanding of 'self' by applying their knowledge in terms of judgement, interpretation, and personal intuition (Heinonen & Spearman, 2010; Sheppard et al., 2000; Sheppard et al., 2001; Sheppard & Ryan, 2003). This application process can be otherwise described as 'fitting together' knowledge which according to Joubert (2017) is achieved through personal growth and confidence. In essence, confidence and personal growth is developed as students actively engage and immersive themselves in the learning experience, allowing them to see the value of their skills and the tasks they are learning (Fortune et al., 2005). Further, students come to develop their knowledge of practical skills through an engaged and immersive experience where they personally connect, relate, and ultimately form a relationship with their disciplinary knowledge.

The notion that *practice makes perfect* speaks not singularly to the value of practice but also captures the ways in which 'doing' cultivates a sense of

connection between students and their knowledge. Recognizing that access to theoretical knowledge tends to follow a 'talk and chalk' approach (Watts & Hodgson, 2012) while access to practical knowledge centralizes contextualised and applied learning (Ahlfeldt et al., 2005; Campbell, 2012) complements the known binary between theory and practice and challenges with application (Wilson & Kelly, 2010). In a way, students' connection to theoretical knowledge can be explained by the consumerist approach where students' relationship with knowledge is based on having knowledge for knowledge's sake and the attainment of credentials (Ashwin et al., 2023). In contrast, the ways in which students engage with practical knowledge exemplifies what is gained when knowledge connects students to the world and their future goals (Ashwin et al., 2023). This distinction subscribes to Habermas' (1971) belief that knowledge derives from meaning and as social work students connect more meaningfully to practical knowledge, it is important for students to connect and find the same meaning to theoretical knowledge.

8.5 How do students come to develop their knowledge of critical self reflection?

This study's second theme *the pursuit of meaning* emerged in response to the research question concerning the ways in which social work students develop their knowledge of critical inquiry. Akin to the development of theoretical and practical knowledge, this theme unveiled the relationship between meaning-making and the development of critical inquiry. In this instance, meaning making can be understood as meaningful learning which occurs when knowledge is considered useful to real life circumstances (Gibbons & Gray, 2004). As it pertains to this research, real life circumstances are the opportunities for students to engage with their disciplinary social work knowledge in interactive and dialogic capacities. Specifically, the development of critical thought emerges as students interact and dialogue amongst themselves through group work, peer-to-peer activities, and engagement with professors. In terms of knowledge development, the opportunities to interact and engage in dialogue serves as a vehicle for

perspective-taking and the contextualization of knowledge or as captured by one participant, offers the opportunity to see ideas from *"different perspectives"* and *"different lights."* Recognizing and embracing difference through critical thought occurs as students come to consider the experiences of others through the examination of issues, existing assumptions, and differing worldviews (Gibbons & Gray, 2004; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005; Tilbury et al., 2010).

As for the contextualisation of knowledge, the findings reveal that the development of critical thought occurs as students locate their critical understanding within issues grounded in social work (Boryczko, 2022). In other words, by interacting in practice situations or dialoging about discipline-related issues through case studies, class discussions, and experiential activities, students engage with knowledge relevant to their discipline of study and in turn, come to develop more meaningful accounts of their knowledge in the process (Ashwin, 2020). The relationship between meaning and critical thinking can be further explained by the influence of individual experiences. The findings revealed that as students connect their critical understanding to practice issues using their frame of reference, students can then identify the purpose, relevance, and overall meaning of their learning. A familiar understanding of critical thought was artfully captured by two participants who stated that critical thinking tends to be taught in a *"boxed"* or *"textbook kind of way"* and while there is value to academic interpretation, this research contends that critical thought is most effectively constructed through a disciplinary lens. To expand, applying critical thought to practice issues allows students to develop and transform their knowledge because of its relation to their field of study (Coleman et al. 2002).   Further, exercising critical knowledge through engaged learning opportunities helps students understand how to comfortably ascribe meaning to their decisions (Hall et al., 2021). As evidenced by these perspectives, students develop critical thinking skills through interactive and dialogic means as it cultivates an interpretative and reflective mindset and provides space for students to use critical thinking skills in various contexts (Boryczko, 2022). Maximizing opportunities to contextualize

critical thinking through interaction and practice can help students comfortably assess and evaluate the field's most complex and ambiguous issues (Coleman et al., 2002), while also providing independence in the knowing process.

8.6 How are undergraduate students prepared to engage in professional practice?

The three previously addressed research questions concern the knowing of undergraduate social work students in terms of theoretical, practical, and critical understanding. These questions are used to unpack this study's primary research question which considers the ways in which social work students are prepared to engage in professional practice. While the previous themes *practice makes perfect* and *the pursuit of meaning* contribute to the answering of this primary question*,* it is the final theme *know thy self* which fully captures the ways in which undergraduate social work students are prepared to engage in professional practice. This research identified the use and utility of 'self' and the role awareness-building, critical thought, and reflection plays in its cultivation. Relatedly to the development of critical thought, the construction of 'self' occurs as students are exposed to the experiences and lives of others. For some this exposure came from the course material delivered in the academic environment where students explored and examined the historical and contemporary realities faced by diverse populations. For other participants, exposure came from opportunities to interact, dialogue, and build relational connections with peers, instructors, and field supervisors. Interaction includes the physical structuring of the learning space that welcomes openness through dialogue and active engagement with peers and professors. These examples demonstrate that the realization of 'self' in terms of understanding and awareness occurs as students are exposed to the experiences of others (Rosen et al., 2017). To learn from the experiences of others cultivates a self-reflective process whereby students come to identify and examine their personal values and practices (Blakemore & Agllias, 2018; Mulder & Dull, 2014) and consider the origins and influences of their social positions. In doing so, the experiences of other's and the meaning of experiences

are identified, critically appraised, and examined in relation to one's life. In essence, this research argues that to experience a transformation in 'self-understanding' is to broaden one's awareness and understanding of their environment and the worldviews they carry (Dempsey et al., 2001; Man Lam et al., 2007). Self-awareness, transformation, and understanding was consistently reflected in the research findings which has much to offer the preparedness of undergraduate social work students.

The relationship between 'self' and preparedness for practice stems from the independence and confidence cultivated as students come to develop their knowledge of 'self'. A key contributor to this perspective is the conscious and unconscious use of self and how these forms of knowing inform decisions made and approaches taken in practice settings. In this research the strongest example of 'self' was the use of intuition as some participants described their professional approaches as feeling natural, intuitive, and human. The common reference to intuitive practice speaks to the strong presence of 'self' and the valuable interplay between personal and formal knowledge (Cheung 2015; Luoma, 1998). In these instances, 'self' manifests as a tool for decision making in professional social work settings as participants have come to trust their own understanding and use of themselves in the helping relationship.

Additionally, this research identified the 'self' as a tool for self-assessment and evaluation. For some participants this involved the evaluation of practice performance and for others, this involved the evaluation of personal mental health and well-being. These examples demonstrate the use of self-awareness to preserve themselves and their well-being under challenging professional circumstances. While 'self' may take different forms, it maintains a strong presence in professional practice and is therefore pertinent to what should be involved in social work student preparedness for practice.

The breadth of the social work field has led to suggestions that the complete preparedness of social work students is an unreasonable expectation (Beddoe et al., 2018; Jack & Donnellan, 2010). This sentiment was also captured

by this research as one participant noted *"the social work field is so broad, it's almost debilitating"* suggesting that preparing students to the fullest extent may not be feasible. These questions are attributable to the broadness of the field in terms of professional roles, range of practice, and community needs, coupled with the variability of degree objectives and the structure of academic programming and practice experiences (Beddoe et al., 2018; Wilson & Kelly, 2010). Indeed, the scope, scale, and variability of social work curricula and practice has created challenges for ensuring a consistent degree of preparedness in terms of theoretical, practical knowledge and critical knowledge. These challenges emphasize a need for educators to optimize ways of knowing which can enhance existing knowledge while also preparing students to operate amongst uncertainty.

Emphasizing the use of 'self' in professional practice involves equipping students with the internal resources to employ their theoretical and practical knowledge as they understand it, while also tapping into their own awareness, insights, and use of critical thought to act independently in practice. To promote 'self' as a knowledge resource will prepare students as they normalize self-related practices which are invaluable to professional practice. These practices include the ongoing pursuit of self-awareness and discovery (Dempsey et al., 2001), an openness to self-transformation and self-renewal (Burrell, 1994), and the application of critical thought, practice wisdom, and professional judgement. As students, newly trained social workers, and educators cannot plan for 'every form of knowing' while in practice, it would be useful to reframe preparedness as more than technique (Seligson, 2004) and to include nurturing, understanding, and using 'self' in professional practice.

Centralizing knowledge of 'self' prepares students to manage the complexities and uncertainties of practice by providing the internal tools, resources, and awareness to withstand challenges they may otherwise fear. These internal resources include self-efficacy and self-belief as students come to recognize what they can achieve under varying circumstances as they come to embrace their developing professional identities (Carpenter et al. 2015; Jack &

Donnellan, 2010). Otherwise characterized as resilience, it is noted that to be ready for practice is to be reflective and confident when facing the realities of changing and challenging social work settings (Joubert, 2017; Joubert, 2020). While this position is not to underestimate the importance of theoretical and practical knowledge in the training of social workers, this position is to simply acknowledge the Habermasian view that there is no knowing without knowing the knower.

8.7 Contribution to Knowledge

This research contributes to the study of social work student knowledge and preparedness (Frost et al., 2013; Joubert, 2017; Joubert, 2020; Lymbery, 2009; Moriarty & Manthorpe, 2013; Saitadze & Dvalishvili, 2021; Tham & Lynch, 2014; Tham & Lynch, 2019; Tham et al., 2023) by identifying important curricular and practice considerations for social work educators. In addressing this study's research questions, I have asserted that social work students come to develop their disciplinary knowledge through a process of connection and meaning. My research has shown that building meaningful connections to knowledge through practice, interaction, and self-defining experiences shifts the knowing process from having "knowledge for knowledge's sake" (Ashwin et al., 2023, p. 10) towards a place of connection, experience, and disciplinary relevance. In this instance, practice is not to be singularly understood as doing or practicing a particular skill through experiential exercises. But rather, practice is also to connect students to knowledge through immersive, dialogic, and relational encounters where questions are answered, mistakes are made, and confidence is realized. In other words, the engaged and immersive nature of practice allows students to work unscripted as they come to experience their knowledge, critically examine, and unpack understanding, and independently find meaning and apply knowledge in different contexts.

It is my view that the immersive and engaged nature of practice is the optimal form of knowledge engagement. The more students engage in practice the more connected they are to their understanding as they come to see themselves

in relation to their disciplinary knowledge (Ashwin, 2014). In essence, practice and all that is gained from practice moves knowledge away from being "meaningfully generic" (Ashwin, 2019., p. 4) and towards a place of embedded disciplinary understanding. Embedded disciplinary understanding is the idea of meaning-making as knowledge is situated within student interests and discipline (Ashwin et al., 2022) and is deemed useful to real life circumstances (Gibbons & Gray, 2004). To assert that practice and the meaning generated from practice cultivates a personally connecting relationship between students and their knowledge, brings new insights to the study of social work student knowledge.

As has been noted, the literature calls for a better understanding of social work student knowledge in terms of the translation of knowledge-to-action and how this knowledge is formalized (Benner et al., 2019; Lewis & Bolzan, 2007). The transferring of knowledge is especially pertinent to this study of preparedness because although a key tenet of social work training is the ability to apply theory to practice, students not only struggle with this application (Wilson & Kelly, 2010) but there exists an overarching disconnect between curricula and practice (Frost et al., 2013; Healy & Meagher, 2004; Tham & Lynch, 2014; Wilson & Kelly, 2010). The positive impact meaningful engagement with critical and self-reflective knowledge has on student development is a salient take-away from this research. Reflecting on the challenges with knowledge translation in social work education, it is my contention that critical thinking and self could be the key connectors between theory and practice.

It is important for social work to extend beyond singular approaches to knowledge acquisition (Ottesen et al., 2020) and promote broader views of knowledge as it has much to offer professional practice (Trevithick, 2008). Broader views involve moving beyond a mere focus of theoretical and practical understanding to also include critical understanding and self-knowledge. In doing so, social work educators can maximize the interplay between knowledge, skills, and values (O'Connor et al., 2019), by seeing learning as a journey (Joubert, 2017), and promoting a level of engagement where students see themselves in

relation to the world and to their disciplinary understanding. As such, exploring preparedness in terms of knowledge engagement has illuminated how students develop their knowledge holistically and can support educators in identifying aspects of social work curricula that should be enhanced to meet student needs (Howard et al., 2015; Saitadze & Dvalishvili, 2021) and strengthen professional education (Apgar, 2019).

8.8 Future Directions for Education

Promoting Practicalized Assessments for Critical Thought

While critical thinking is highly valued among social work educators (Hall et al., 2021; Mathias, 2015) there is a lack of knowledge activities which are traceable to the assessment and evaluation of critical thought (Samson, 2021). A consideration of this research is not to singularly emphasize the importance of critical inquiry as this is already known, but to integrate the value of practice in the development of critical knowledge. To see the value of practice in the context of critical knowing is to promote and encourage meaningful learning opportunities for students to engage with their critical knowledge. As has been clearly established, meaningful learning can be understood as learning which is useful to real life circumstances (Gibbons & Gray, 2004) and based on these findings, the more situated students are in the learning experience the more connected they are to their knowledge. It would be beneficial for social work educators to consider practically informed pedagogies which promote the active application of critical thought. In this instance, active application may involve students directly identifying the relevance and meaning of their critical knowledge (Taylor, 2000) as they are situated in the learning experience. To be situated in the learning experience can include dialogue, reflective talk, problem-solving activities, and engagement with teachers and learners (Gibbons & Gray, 2004). Additionally, outside the academic environment, opportunities to practically develop critical thinking skills can be achieved through field education and service-learning opportunities (Boryczko, 2022). These approaches would build on the dominant analytical activities such as essays and reflective journeys (Hall et al., 2019) and

provide new ways for students to develop critical thinking skills. It is important to note that while these activities have their place, there is merit to promoting opportunities for students to engage more meaningfully with critical knowledge.

Promoting 'Self' as a valued form of knowledge

This research has emphasized the role of 'self' in the development and use of social work knowledge. These findings are congruent with the literature's view that 'self' while pivotal to the fundamentals of social work, lacks a clear and unified understanding (Gordan & Dunworth, 2016; Liechty, 2018). In this research, 'self' was examined in terms of self-reflection and self-awareness, which is consistent with common interpretations of self as a form personal understanding (Deal, 1997). Despite being considered a core capability among newly trained social workers (Thompson & West, 2012), the literature acknowledges an unclear and ambiguous conceptualization of 'self, particularly in the context of education (Liechty, 2018). As research exploring the development of 'self' in undergraduate social work education is quite limited (Marlow et al., 2014) there is a need to better understand in what ways 'self' should be taught and learned in social work education (Liechty, 2018).

One consideration from a pedagogical perspective is for educators to promote 'self' as a developmental process (Dempsey et al., 2001) rather than a concrete skill to be mastered. This point is usefully supported by one participant who expressed that *"self-reflection loses its meaning when you are asked to cite your trauma",* indicating that evaluating self as an intellectualized skill rather than a developmental process has its limitations. To promote and evaluate 'self' as a developmental process is to encourage "the interplay between students' experiences and the dynamic context in which their experiences are embedded" (Man Lam et al., 2007, p. 103), reintroducing the value of practice experiences. While independent knowledge exercises such as journaling and written reflections support the development of self-awareness (Mulder & Dull, 2014), these exercises run the risk of "intellectualizing reflection" which can inhibit what reflection is intended to achieve (Boud, 1999). As this research has explored the relationship

between 'self' and student preparedness, these findings are supportive of Joubert (2017; 2020) whose work on social work student readiness speaks to the importance of 'self' in social work curricula. Specifically, Joubert (2020) posits that social work educators should identify appropriate vehicles for the "exploration, emergence, and development of self within the curriculum" (p. 11), which closely aligns with the outcome of this study.

While critical thinking and 'self' are viewed as distinct forms of knowledge in this research, collectively, these concepts are equally fundamental to the preparedness of undergraduate social work students. To expand, a known challenge students face as they prepare for professional practice is the ability to integrate theory and practice (Wilson & Kelly, 2010) which impacts the perceived capabilities of newly trained social workers. As critical thinking and 'self' have been identified as key connectors between theory and practice, there exists a valuable opportunity to centralize critical thinking and 'self' in the curricula. As such, it is my assertion that by promoting and stabilizing critical thought and 'self' in social work education, there are opportunities to remove the binary between 'theory' and 'practice' and support the production of capable and confident social workers.

8.9 Final Thoughts

When I started this journey, my initial curiosity surrounding social work student preparedness was largely influenced by my experience as an educator and social worker. It was my hope that the knowledge gained from my research would constructively shape my teaching practices and positively impact my view of social work education. Among the many rewards this experience has brought, perhaps the most profound is the personal realization of 'self' in my knowing process. As I reflect on my years as a student and aspiring social worker, carrying with me the thoughts and fears similarly shared by participants in this research, I am humbly reminded of the people who shaped my journey, as well as the missteps, wins, uncertainties, and excitement that accompanied this journey. While I did not realize it at the time, as I travelled down the long road from student to social worker, I was pursing my journey toward 'self' as I came to develop my

knowledge of social work. Expectedly, my relationship with social work has evolved and through this experience, I have come to appreciate my relationship with social work knowledge in all its forms. As I conclude this thesis, it is my hope this research will make a valuable contribution to a field which has meant so much to me and most importantly, will encourage social work students to build meaningful and transformative relationships with their knowledge and embrace their journey towards 'self' and social work.

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Appendix A.1

Interview Script: Students

Warm up questions:

- Why did you decide to pursue social work?
- What do you hope to do with your degree?

- What do you find fascinating about social work? What skills do they value the most? What do you think you need to work on to improve? What makes a good social worker?

1. What courses have taught you technical social work skills? What are these technical skills?
2. What skills have you gained from these technical courses?
3. What courses have taught you theories relevant to social work practice?
4. What knowledge have you acquired from these theoretical courses?
5. Why are these skills/theories important?
6. To what extent have you employed the technical skills you have learned? Can you provide examples?
7. To what extent have you applied the theories you have learned? Can you provide examples?
8. How do you ascribe meaning to the skills/knowledge you have? For example, what methods/approaches do you use to inform your use of a particular skill or theory?
9. What have you learned in your education that enables you to employ/apply the skills you have learned?
10. What do you understand about critical thinking?
11. How can you use critical thinking in professional practice?
12. What does the process of self-reflection mean to you?
13. What have you gained from engaging in critical self-reflection? For example, how has reflection informed decisions/choices you've made in the context of your education and practice?
14. What aspects of your education (e.g. practicum, course work) have informed your understanding of critical thinking? Self-reflection?
15. Is there anything you would like to add?

Appendix A.2

Interview Script: Newly Trained Social Workers

1. What types of courses taught you technical social work skills? What skills did you gain from them?
2. *What types of courses taught you theories relevant to social work practice? What knowledge did you acquire from these theoretical courses?*
3. Why are these skills/theories important?

4. To what extent do you employ these technical skills in your current practice? Can you provide examples?

5. To what extent do you apply the theories in your professional practice? Can you provide examples?

6. How do you decide when to use particular skill/theory in your practice?

7. What did you learn in your education that has enabled you to employ/apply the skills in your current role?

8. What did your education teach you about critical thinking?

9. How do you use critical thinking in your professional practice? Can you provide examples?

10. What did your education teach you about self-reflection?

11. To what extent does critical self-reflection inform your professional practice?

12. What aspects of your education (e.g. practicum, course work) informed your understanding of critical thinking? Self-reflection?

13. What current challenges do you face in your workplace as a social worker?

14. What skills, knowledge, and values do you wish you gained during your university education when reflecting on your current practice?

15. To what extent did the education you received practically reflect the realities and issues you have faced in your workplace?

16. Did you feel prepared for professional practice? What aspect(s) of your education prepared you for professional practice?

17. Is there anything you would like to add?

Appendix A.3

Interview Script

Faculty

1. What types of courses do you teach?
2. What year do you teach?
3. How many years have you been teaching?
4. *How do students develop and demonstrate their understanding of technical social work skills?*

5. *In what way(s) do you observe/assess students using their technical social work skills?*

6. *How do students develop and demonstrate their understanding of social work theories?*

7. *In what way(s) do you observe /assess students understanding of social work theory?*

8. How do students develop and demonstrate their understanding of critical thinking?

9. In what way(s) do you observe students using their critical thinking skills?

10. How do students develop and demonstrate their understanding of self-reflection?

11. In what way(s) do you observe students engaging in self-reflection?

12. Reflecting on your teaching approach, what pedagogical approaches do you use find effectively prepare students for practice?

13. What challenges do you foresee students facing as they enter professional practice?

14. In what ways does the curricula adequately prepare students for professional practice?

15. In what ways can social work curricula be strengthened/changed to adequately prepare students for professional practice?

<p style="text-align:center">Appendix B</p>

Participant information sheet

<p style="text-align:center">The Knowing of Undergraduate Social Work Students: Understanding</p>

<p style="text-align:center">Preparedness for Professional Practice</p>

> For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage:
> www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/dataprotection

My name is Olivia Boukydis, and I am a PhD student at Lancaster University. I would like to invite you to participate in my doctoral research project titled, *The Knowing of Undergraduate Social Work Students: Understanding Preparedness for Professional Practice.* Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?

The purpose of this study is to explore the preparedness of undergraduate social work students in terms of knowledge engagement. Knowledge engagement is understood as the praxis of knowledge acquisition, engagement, and application, and the degree to which knowledge prepares students for professional practice. I am particularly interested in understanding how students engage with knowledge within social work curricula and how this informs the transition from student knowledge to professional practice.

Why have I been invited?

You are being approached because of your experience in undergraduate social work education. As I am interested in the process of how students acquire, apply, and develop professional knowledge, your familiarity with social work knowledge

and social work curricula would be invaluable to my research. I would be very grateful if you would take part.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?

Individual Interviews

If you volunteer to take part in this study, you will be asked to take part in an individual interview lasting approximately 35 to 45 minutes. The individual interview will pose questions exploring your perspective of social work student knowledge in terms of technical skills, application, and critical knowledge. During the individual interview, you will not have to respond to any questions you do not wish to answer. During the interview, your responses will be audio recorded to assist with recall and clarification. The individual interviews will be conducted either in-person or via Zoom/Microsoft Teams software.

What are the possible benefits from taking part?

This research study has the following potential benefits:

1. Contribution toward the study of social work student preparedness for professional practice

2. Contribution toward social work discourse in terms of social work knowledge

3. Contribution toward to the potential enhancement of social work curricula in terms of meeting student learning needs and strengthening professional education

Do I have to take part?

You are not required to participate in this study, your participation is completely voluntary. **For students,** if you decide not to take part in this study, this will not affect your studies or standing in your academic program. **For faculty,** if you decide not to take part in this study, this will not affect your professional position or your relations with your employer.

What if I change my mind?

You are free to withdraw from this study within six weeks of your individual interview. If you would like to withdraw within the six-week period, I will extract and destroy the data you contributed. Please note, there are considerable challenges with removing data from one specific participant once the data has been anonymised and analysed with other participant data. Therefore, you are only able to withdraw up to six weeks after taking part in the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Taking part in this study will mean investing your own personal time. If you participate only in the individual interviews, then this time will be approximately 35 to 45 minutes.

Will my data be identifiable?

After the individual interview and focus group observation, only myself and my supervisor Dr. Melis Cin will have access to your contributions. While I intend to transcribe the data myself, in the event I do enlist the services of a professional transcriber, they will have access to the ideas shared. Specifically, the transcriber would listen to the recording and produce a written record of what you have said. In the event this route is taken, the transcriber will sign a confidentiality agreement. I will keep all personal information about you (e.g. your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential, that is I will not share it with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution. All reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?

The information you share in this study will be used only for research purposes. This will include:

1. My PhD thesis
2. Academic publications (i.e. journal articles)

3. Professional presentations (i.e. academic or professional conferences) where I present the results of this study

4. When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymized quotes (e.g. from my interview with you), so that although I will use your exact words, all reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity in our publications.

How my data will be stored

Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in my office. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on a specific topic). In accordance with University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

What if I have a question or concern?

If you have any questions or if you are not satisfied with the information provided,

please feel free to contact me.

Olivia A. Boukydis

o.boukydis@lancaster.ac.uk

1-289-221-7687

Supervisor's Contact Information

Dr. Melis Cin

m.cin@lancaster.ac.uk

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

Appendix C

CONSENT FORM

Project Title - The Knowing of Undergraduate Social Work Students: Understanding

Preparedness for Professional Practice

Name of Researchers: Olivia Boukydis

Email: o.boukydis@lancaster.ac.uk

Please tick each box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily	☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within six weeks after I take part in the study, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within six weeks of taking part in the study, then my data will be removed.	☐
3. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications, or presentations by the researcher, but my personal information will not be included, and all reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.	☐
4. I understand that my name/my organisation's name will not appear in any reports, articles, or presentation without my consent.	☐

5. I understand that any interviews will be recorded and transcribed, and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	☐
6. I understand that data will be kept according to university guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	☐
7. I agree to take part in the above study.	☐

_____   _____   _____

Name of Participant   Date   Signature

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent_____

Date _____   Day/month/year

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University

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Appendix D.1

Poster for Students

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

LOOKING FOR VOLUNTEERS FOR MY PHD RESEARCH ON SOCIAL WORK STUDENT PREPAREDNESS

Participate in a 30-minute confidential interview reflecting on your experience and knowledge of social work.

In appreciation of your time, participants will be given a $30 Amazon gift card.

I AM LOOKING FOR:

BSW STUDENTS IN THEIR FINAL YEAR OF STUDY

If you are interested and would like to additional details, please contact
Olivia Boukydis at
olivia.boukydis@guelphhumber.ca
This study has received ethics approval through
Lancaster University Research Ethics Board.

Appendix D.2

Letter to Participants

Hello,

My name is Olivia Boukydis, and I am a PhD student studying in the Educational Research Department at Lancaster University. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study, which explores undergraduate social work student preparedness in terms of social work knowledge. My professional background in social work has motivated by research focus, which is why I am reaching out to you today.

Attached is the participant information sheet which will provide further details of the project and your role as a potential participant. If you are a student in your final year of study or a faculty and are interested in participating or have any questions, see my contact information below.

This project is under the guidance of my thesis supervisor Dr. Melis Cin, Senior Lecturer in the Educational Research Department at Lancaster University. Additionally, this project has been approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Management School Research Ethics

Committee (FASS-LUMS REC).

Thank you in advance for your consideration and interest in my research project.

Kind Regards,

Olivia A. Boukydis, MSW, RSW, PhD Candidate o.boukydis@lancster.ac.uk.ca

1-289-221-7687

Appendix D.3

Advertising Letter to the Ontario Association of Social Workers

Hello OASW members,

My name is Olivia Boukydis, and I am a social worker and PhD student completing my thesis on social work student preparedness for professional practice. I am looking for volunteers to participate in a 30-to-40-minute confidential interview reflecting on your experience and knowledge of social work.

I am currently recruiting: Newly trained social workers (graduated from a Bachelor of Social Work Program within the last three years) and faculty (sessional/part-time/full-time) in a Bachelor of Social Work program.

In appreciation of your time, participants will be given a $30.00 Amazon gift card.

If you are interested and would like additional details, please contact Olivia Boukydis
olivia.boukydis@guelphhumber.ca by June 1st, 2023.

This study has received ethics approval through Lancaster University Research Ethics Board.

Appendix E.1

Data Coding Procedure

Original Code Labels

Round One

31 Original Code Labels   - Semantic Codes (Descriptive)
Additional Comments
Recommendations – Faculty
Can we prepare students?
Curriculum comments
Challenges in the field
Faculty – confidence/preparedness
How to transfer knowledge to practice
Development of critical thinking
Development of self reflection
Theoretical skill development
Instructor approach
Intuitive/natural/engrained qualities
Practical skill development
Practice based teaching
How do we prepare students
Student engagement with knowledge
Student transformation of identity/self
Challenges faced in the field
Preparedness
Helping teaching strategies
Knowledge of practice
Knowledge of theory

Use of self-reflection
Application of critical thinking
Knowledge of critical thinking
Use of theory
Use of practice
Practice wisdom
Application of knowledge
Ascribing meaning to theory ascribing meaning to practice
Confidence

Appendix E.2

Data Coding Procedure

Categorized Code Labels

Round Two

Categories	21 Code Labels (Descriptive)
Theoretical Knowledge	• Knowledge of practice • Use of theory • Knowledge of theory • Use of practice • Practical skill development • Theoretical skill development
Communicative Knowledge	• Practice Wisdom • Ascribing meaning to practice • Ascribing meaning to theory • The transferring of knowledge to practice
Critical Inquiry	• Knowledge of critical thinking • Application of critical thinking • Development of self-reflection • How to transfer knowledge to practice
Self	• Transformation of Identity • Confidence • Intuitive and naturally informed qualities
Student transformation to Practicing Professional	• Helpful teaching strategies • Preparedness • Practice based teaching • Instructor Approach

Appendix E.3

Data Coding Procedure

Categorized Code Labels

Round Three

Categories	15 code labels (latent)
Theoretical Knowledge	- Practice knowledge is digestible - Theory is a framework - Theory is debateable - Practical skills are about "getting a feel" - Theory is good "in theory"
Communicative Knowledge	- Practice wisdom as a comfortable concept - How to attach meaning to knowledge - Interaction promotes knowledge transfer
Critical Inquiry	- Critical thinking is perspective taking - You can't force reflection - Critical thinking is not a purely academic construct – learn in the moment
Self and Student Transformation	- Transformation of Identity - Confidence is preparedness - Self-trust is the use of intuition

-