Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Australian Social Work Field Education: A Standpoint Promoting Human Rights and Social Justice?

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Abstract

A recent qualitative study explored the concept of recognition of prior learning (RPL) within Australian social work field education programs just prior to policy changes permitting it. The findings prompt pondering of any assumed alignment of social work, social justice, and RPL, and contribute to limited international debate.

Keywords: recognition of prior learning (RPL); social work education; field practicum; social justice

1.   Introduction

Learning from work and life experience—result(s) in forms of knowledge that are distinctly different from those of the academy… (worker knowledge, Indigenous knowledge, women's knowledge, etc.). In its radical form … RPL is … a means whereby subjugated or marginalized groups or forms of knowledge can gain access to the academy and challenge the authority of hegemonic discourse (Breier, 2005, p.56).

Framing social work as a human rights profession has certain consequences for the way in which social work is conceptualized and practiced (Ife, 2008, p.4).

Changing global markets, shifting political, sociocultural and workplace conditions, and the restructuring of the higher education sector have forced change among higher education, the workforce, and the economy. The role of recognition of prior learning (RPL) is located within this context. Harris (1997, 2000) argued that RPL originated in higher education in North America and developed into a range of recognition and assessment processes spanning higher, further, and adult education and workforce training on an international scale. In the United Kingdom, the term used is the accreditation of prior experiential learning [APL or AP(E)L], as aligned with the Bologna process, which supports flexible paths into and within higher education (Harris, 2006; Valk, 2009). In tertiary systems in South Africa, RPL was promoted as a "form of educational redress" for individuals excluded from entering formal education under apartheid (Breier & Ralphs, 2009, p.482). In Australia, a national framework of qualifications initiated in the early 1990s identified RPL as a key strategy and an entry pathway into tertiary education that promoted social inclusion (Cameron, 2006).

More recently the Australian Quality Framework Advisory Committee has defined

RPL as nonformal and informal learning, as different from credit transfer for formal learning (Price & Jackson-Barrett, 2009). Harris (1997, p. 2) noted that RPL represented a potential "deinstitutionalising of knowledge" that has not been embraced fully by higher education, yet conversely may have been accommodated uncritically into other workforce training.

Reflecting similarities to the core values of social work, it is claimed that RPL embodies emancipation and social justice, advantaging the excluded, illuminating and validating knowledges that previously have been invisible, and breaking down discriminatory barriers to education under a human rights agenda (Burtch, 2006). Further, RPL is said to endorse lifelong learning, recognize mature women's contributions to the economy and the skilled labor market, enhance access to learning institutions, and help workers acquire "qualified" status without being compelled to relearn what they already know (Fox, 2005; Harris, 1997; Kemp, 2003). RPL is a key strategy for making education more accessible and can assist with closing the gap between privileged and marginalized peoples, including Indigenous learners (Dyson & Keating, 2005).

The values underpinning RPL philosophies reflect UNESCO's "education for all" Millennium Goals (UNESCO, 2009) and the Closing the Gap (2009) campaign objectives (Price & Jackson-Barrett, 2009). Other authors have acknowledged the limitations of RPL as a panacea for widening access and participation, noting that it is rarely promoted, and that many equity groups, including semi-skilled and unskilled workers, school leavers and long-term unemployed, may not benefit from RPL policies (Cameron, 2006).

Historically, RPL in Australian social work education has been permitted by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), at the discretion of universities, for *entry* into programs, but it has not been permissible for field education. According to AASW in 2000 (p. 3), "Recognition of Prior Learning is a judgment of an institution of the caliber of previous formal study …, and

whether to credit such learning," but that… " recognition of prior learning cannot be used to give credit in a BSW program" (AASW, 2000, p. 11). From 2008, AASW has permitted workplace experiences, skills, and knowledge as RPL toward field placement, heralding a new era. A renewed AASW definition of RPL in 2008 states: recognition of prior learning is "a judgment of an institution of the caliber of previous learning in the workplace, separate from formal learning, and whether to credit such learning" (AASW, 2008, p. 46). Permitting RPL for field placement recognizes social work students' existing workplace expertise and provides processes for circumventing pathways.

When considering the AASW Code of Ethics (2010), and the latest AASW RPL policy, it appears that the Code of Ethics and RPL have similar social justice aspirations. In this article, an overview of the history, philosophies, and theories informing RPL provides a backdrop to the presentation of findings from a recent study. On reflection, a closer alignment between social work, social justice, and RPL is contemplated. This study was conceptualized and under way before national RPL policy changes were implemented. Subsequent processes implemented by individual schools of social work must comply with national AASW guidelines and as such, it is national policies that influence the following discussion.

2.   Theories and Critiques of RPL as Change Agent

As noted above, in Australia, a national framework of qualifications initiated in the early 1990s identified RPL as a key strategy promoting social inclusion (Cameron, 2006). Burns (2002, p. 63) wrote that RPL was proclaimed as a valuable component of competency-based training, heralding increased access to education and thereby empowering individuals who felt "locked out" of tertiary study. Most recently, AASW policies have moved beyond supporting recognition of prior learning only for *entry* into a BSW to recognizing workplace learning that can

be credited toward coursework. These changes to RPL policies may in part have been promoted by the changing landscape of social work education and the workplace, including part-time students who need the flexibility to work due to economic imperatives, and the enrollment of many more students who had worked previously in welfare-related employment (Cooper, 2007).

Such changes are most evident in the student profile for those enrolled in new, two-year masters qualifying programs, designed to attract experienced workers without a BSW, in a highly competitive tertiary education marketplace. These courses have increased the demand for flexible placement arrangements, in the face of decreasing placement opportunities. RPL for field education can contribute to reducing this burden. Yet, as Burns (2002) noted, a status quo is often maintained even after RPL is implemented because of the feared danger of lowered standards, often perceived as a "slippery slope" argument (Lewis, 2007, p.197). Burns identified that this fear can overshadow new ways of crediting students' prior learning.

Seeking to explain these inconsistencies between *allowing* RPL and *embracing* it, Harris (1997) identified a continuum of RPL models from empowering, learner-centered approaches to outcome orientated, competency-based ones where power issues rarely are considered. Harris conceded that, in reality, a learner-oriented and outcome-oriented *mix* could apply, but Harris wondered how, given their opposing traditions. Regarding intent, Young (2006) asserted that RPL policies often are not embraced for reasons of social justice, rather, such "fast track routes" into higher education serve government, institutional and workforce agendas.

After reviewing available literature Breier (2005) recognized that much of it discussed RPL as credit for *entry* into postsecondary courses. To differentiate, Breier opted to discuss "rpl" (*lowercase, rather than RPL)* as relating to *post-entry* coursework credit (2005, p. 54). Breier draws from the work of several authors, including

Harris (1997, 2000) to present multiple theories informing rpl.

- First, a *technical/market* perspective that prioritizes knowledge, skills, and values of benefit to the economy; locates students as consumers; and recognizes that prior life and work experience can be matched against predefined learning outcomes in a standardized credit framework.
- Second, a *liberal/humanist* perspective recognizing that all prior experiences of adult learners "should be valued and used as a resource for further learning" (p.58). Drawing on the work of Brookfield (1998), Breier (2005) acknowledged that under this tradition, romantic assumptions that a learner's experience always would constitute a rich resource, or that all learners have the capacity to learn from experience, needed to be challenged. Nevertheless, a liberal/humanist rpl provides some opportunity for students to reflect on how their prior learning is similar to or different from formal learning.
- Third, a *critical/radical* perspective, underpinned by feminist, emancipatory, rights-based, standpoint, and social constructivist discourses, which assumes that experiences and knowledge cannot be separated from history; that knowledge is contextual; and that knowledge need not be represented only within academic norms. As identified in the opening quote, under this model, outsider and marginalized knowledges that often are ignored by the academy, such as practical knowledge, women's knowledge, and Indigenous knowledges (Breier, 2005, p.56), would be valued and rendered visible.

Other significant theoretical influences underpinning RPL, according to Harris (2006), are Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycles and Knowles' adult learning model (1980), both with roots in constructivism. Young (2006, p.323) stated that debate between knowledge and experience is "as old as education itself," both as an "epistemological issue"—Where does

knowledge come from?—and a "pedagogical issue:" How can learners acquire knowledge that takes them beyond their experiences?

3.   A Focus on AASW Field Education Context

Field placement is considered to be an integral component of Australian social work. This supervised practice arm within a social work degree must provide students with a minimum of 28 weeks (980 hours) of real-world preparation and discipline enculturation in a human service organization under supervision of a social work–trained supervisor. However, opportunities for consistent, high-quality placements can be a challenge, with some agencies and practitioners limiting the learning opportunities they provide (Cooper, 2007). In an ongoing disciplinary tension, nonsocial worker task supervisors are recruited to help meet placement demands.

Equally, many students have requested exemption through RPL from field placements because of their levels of practical knowledge and experience, and financial difficulties with the length of placement (Abrum, Hartung, & Wernet, 2000; Coulton & Krimmer, 2005; Wayne, Raskin, & Bogo, 2006). It is only recently, and not without debate, that prior work experience can now be credited toward the social work field practicum in Australia (Crisp & Maidment, 2009).

The issue of experienced welfare workers seeking social work qualifications has resulted from a number of factors, including employer difficulties recruiting qualified social workers in some geographical regions and some fields of practice; employers encouraging experienced workers to advance their qualifications; new masters programs as noted above; and some workers seeking validation of a "piece of paper" to gain due recognition for their existing knowledge (Crisp & Maidment, 2009, p.172).

Crisp & Maidment (2009) acknowledged that some experienced students are skeptical about how much more they might learn studying for a BSW, but subsequently may embrace new learning opportunities. Nevertheless, for some experienced

workers, prescribed coursework subjects may represent significant information duplication, and a lack of available recognition of prior learning for field education has provided a past deterrent for some students to begin or continue studying. According to Cooper (2007, p.100) a new paradigm of social work education would see students "as people who have capacity to construct meaning from their previous experiences rather than as empty shells." Emphasizing values that are implicit in social work education, Taylor and Clemans (cited in Price & Jackson-Barrett, 2009) stated that RPL is the logical consequence of supporting a theory of experiential learning.

4.   Social Justice, Human Rights, Social Work and RPL

According to the AASW Code of Ethics, social justice is one of three core values of the Code. It says that:

> "Social justice refers to the concept of a society in which justice is achieved in every aspect of society rather than merely through the administration of law. It is generally considered as a social world which affords individuals and groups fair treatment, equality and an impartial share of the benefits of membership of society" (AASW Code of Ethics, 2010, p.46, citing Ife, 2010).

As noted in the second opening quote on human rights, Ife (2008) frames social work as a human rights profession, and identifies that there are certain consequences in this position for the way in which social work is conceptualized and practiced.

The research study discussed below builds, in part, on previous research exploring barriers to completing a BSW for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Gair, Thomson, and Savage (2005) found that lack of recognition of prior practice experience, workplace learning, and cultural knowledge used in practice, particularly in relation to required field education,

was a significant disincentive for mature-aged Indigenous students. Many such students are experienced practitioners, having entered the welfare workplace as opportunities arose over the last two decades. Further, Gair et al. (2005) found that a lack of recognition of Indigenous knowledges within curricula continued to be an ongoing barrier once these students enrolled in a BSW. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are identified as Australia's most disadvantaged peoples in terms of human rights and, disproportionate to population percentages, they are the highest users of welfare, mental health, justice, and corrections systems in Australia, while having lower entry numbers into higher education. It was an evident shortage of Indigenous social workers, and difficulties recruiting and retaining Indigenous students, that triggered the aforementioned study (Gair et al., 2005).

Although that study focused on barriers for Indigenous students only, lack of RPL has been identified as a disincentive for many mature-aged students. In 2006, Wayne et al. (p.167) called for a radical change "to assess whether students could be exempt from part or the entire placement requirement." Some of this change is reflected in the new AASW guidelines for RPL, although it is restricted to first placement for students who can demonstrate, and have validated, many years of prior, supervised practice, as aligned with the AASW Practice Standards and Code of Ethics. The study findings reported below are presented to contribute to debate of RPL, virtually absent from social work literature.

5. Methodology

A qualitative, interpretivist approach underpinned the study. Rich data were collected from participants who were interested in discussing RPL in relation to social work field education. Snowball sampling, also called network sampling, was used to secure the volunteer sample, beginning with several people and then recruiting through their networks and my own (Neuman, 2011; Strauss & Corbin,

1990). The sample consisted of 17 participants with welfare and social work qualifications; 15 females and 2 males; and 5 Indigenous and 12 non-Indigenous participants. In keeping with the methodology, in-depth interviews were undertaken and recorded. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples particularly were encouraged to participate in order to build on the aforementioned study and to capture and include their views and perspectives. Pseudonyms are used to maintain confidentiality.

All participants were working in northern, regional Australia (Queensland and Northern Territory) and all had experiences of field education. This study was funded by an AASW small grant. Interviews were undertaken in 2008–2009 and the data were analyzed in 2010. Two research questions guided this study:

1. How is/can RPL be conceptualized in a BSW field education program?
2. How could we measure RPL in a BSW field education program?

The questions were deliberately broad, given the exploratory nature of the study and the very limited available literature. A thematic approach was used for analysis, and theme saturation was reached by repeatedly reading through the transcripts and noting trends and clusters. Adhering to principles of qualitative research, large and smaller quotes were used to present the data. It is acknowledged that all interpretations are those of the author. Limitations of this study could include the use of network sampling and the limited literature informing the research questions and analysis.

6. Findings

Participants in this study expressed views in a range from one "avid" supporter to one non-supporter of RPL. Nevertheless the four emerging themes reflect the majority of views that supported a balanced but rigorous approach to accommodating RPL. The themes were: "beyond the novice";

"a balancing act"; "beware the slippery slope"; and "measuring breadth of experience." These themes are now discussed, with an emphasis on latter themes. Some quotes appear to exemplify a shift in thinking within interviews toward supporting RPL, and elements of Breier's theoretical models are evident in some responses. This point is developed in the Discussion section below.

6.1   Beyond the novice

Most participants recognized that students with prior practice knowledge were at a different starting point from inexperienced students, as exemplified in these quotes:

> "…people who have already acquired enough experience, … recognizing the things people have done… prior to coming into a social work degree and saying…'Okay, well that meets enough of the objectives… we'll give them credit for it….' " (Anna)

> "In a placement situation it might be… You don't have to go right back to the very beginning." (Mavis)

> "It's a lot to do with their personal experience that is generalizable to the profession … an Indigenous person in social welfare… and then a person outside the culture …they say we have to educate you in this certain way for you to be able to do the role, … that person has probably got a lot more expertise in many ways … that should be understood and recognized. Their starting point … is further along than a novice." (Gary)

Harris (2006) observed that the defining assumption of RPL is that adults have prior practice learning and current competencies that can be recognized, assessed, and accredited.

6.2   A balancing act: The benefits of placement and who needs it

Many participants used the concept of "balance." They offered illustrative stories as they weighed the profession's responsibilities regarding practice learning versus students gaining exemption through RPL. Others emphasized the opportunity, with hindsight, to link theory to practice versus the burden of placement. There also was discussion of potential disadvantage for some students who already have skills and capacities:

> "I am an avid supporter of RPL for one placement… I guess I am open to the idea… if someone has done a first placement they could actually get credit for the second, but I think it fits best with the first placement. There are many advantages with having a final placement both as in gatekeeping and… it provides…an opportunity to get jobs. Look, there's a huge range of different issues. … However, I don't think those are reasons why people shouldn't do placement. We have to balance the pedagogical with the practical." (Anna)

> "I was doing my social work degree as a distance student and I was the coordinator of the service, and I sought to do my placement in the organization… or at least get some recognition. …The university was very reluctant to allow me to do that. Struggling financially, I've already got practice experience. …I was a mature age student… a lot of life experience. In hindsight it (placement) was a really great learning experience … (but) some recognition is important … because it values that past experience. I could have achieved the same with a shorter prac(ticum)… a bit of balance around it. …" (Sara)

> "Creative flexibility with a responsible backbone. …It isn't like saying, you know, anything goes…there has to be a balance. …" (Mavis)

Some ambivalence seems evident in these below responses as positives and negatives are weighed:

"My first reaction is, 'Oh' like not actually something positive. On reflection I think if you've got good RPL policies, if you give the student a chance to address the learning outcomes. … When you consider the current economic climate… Somebody's already worked substantially in the industry, why not recognize that?" (Irene)

"For a long time there hasn't been any provision for RPL… most students juggling part-time work.…The beauty of placement is putting your theory into practice…in a safe, supervised context. I suppose I am fairly open to some sort of RPL. Where it's harder is how students demonstrate they've had supervision. The thing I worry about is how many of the links to actual social work knowledge base and skill they make… it's retrospectively trying to make previous experience fit." (Alice)

"I probably have pros and cons for RPL. I think in general yes—(if) people have done the work. I've known people who have almost been employed in a social work position for 15 years and couldn't get RPL. She really did have a good understanding of social work values and ethics… she just didn't have 'the piece of paper.' When it came to field placement… and needing to give up work…she withdrew from the course. You can get people who've done a teaching degree…it's a different professional base…. But when you've got someone whose been working as a social worker, no RPL discriminates against them." (Jenny)

"Well…for the placement, which is terribly onerous…they would be able to gain credit. I think there often is a 'two-way street'…but it becomes exploitative.… If I think of the knowledge transfer if it was on a balance sheet it would be far greater the other way.… I'm not saying placement's a bad thing but I think RPL could be a good, groundbreaking rejuvenation of the profession if we used it properly." (Lena)

Inferred above and familiar in social work discourse is the role placement plays in students' learning and enculturation into the social work profession. However, Abrum et al. (2000, p.173) argue that non–social work task supervisors are often meeting growing demands for placements, while social workers act as "backup supervisors" who "co-sign placement documents." Similarly, in some interviews the important "gatekeeper role" was mentioned, but LaFrance, Gray and Herbert (2004) caution against transferring the gatekeeping role to the field when it replaces adequate course completion criteria.

6.3   Beware the slippery slope

Maintaining standards was a significant talking point in the interviews. It extends the previous theme but with a distinct shift to perceiving a possible slide toward lower standards. As noted earlier, Burns (2002) identified that the status quo often is maintained because of fears over inevitable lowered standards as a result of RPL, although little research appears to support this notion. Such fears often are conceived as a "slippery slope," and that language emerged here.

A majority of participants noted that RPL may have a potential to undermine discipline and institutional reputations. Concepts including "back door" dealings, making it "too easy" and "watered down" by opening the "floodgates" were all voiced in the interviews by Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants, who were all mindful that any RPL course credit should not mean

diminished standards or expectations. Participants emphasized upholding the integrity of the degree as a priority when considering RPL. Equally, it was identified that "going overboard" with onerous, prescriptive requirements, perceived as "hoop jumping," also was undesirable. Again the inference was of getting the balance right:

"I think people have a lot of prior learning… that should be recognized… By the same token it has to be recognized within the context. But if people can demonstrate that, then I think open the floodgates… But I think we need to make sure the policy is very clear. While there's recognition of it…still the same standards apply… use of self, ethics, standards of work, professional skills, and make sure it's not seen as 'oh it's another back door'" (Gary)

"You have to be able to respect it and you have to be able to practice it… not watered down. Someone might have done extensive work for years…I don't think school leavers would be asking for RPL…you'd look at individual cases" (Doris)

"… what I am trying to say is that I think RPL at the moment… is historical documentation rather than demonstrating competencies in a more live kind of situation…but I think the danger is that you could actually go overboard…do you know what I mean, just trying to balance 'going overboard' on the one hand and being too simplistic on the other." (Conrad)

"… from my experience, sometimes… you have got to jump through hoops to fulfill the requirements, to get credit for what you have bloody done, you know that sort of 'fit between the lines.'"(Lena)

"I don't think that if you've volunteered for Meals on Wheels for 20 years then there's an application for RPL. I think it does need to be substantial, paid… but then *unpaid* work in a helping capacity can sometimes be way more complex. I mean… in an Indigenous community, in some of the refugee communities… it is not paid work but it's support skills, caring skills, networking skills. Yeah, we tick off third-year placements when the students haven't done half those things.… I mean there's a lot of argument against RPL." (Anna)

Reflecting this position of being against RPL, this participant was confident that the experience of supervised social work placements is unique and cannot be replaced with RPL:

"I think we can be too flexible…we had people as you well know who have gotten through, academically brilliant but really ought never to be out there—I think by saying 'you've had these experiences, but this is why you need to do your prac(ticum) under supervision to obtain that professional philosophy.' The supervision *in* the experience…to marry up the academic learning with the actual experience. I think it can only occur in fact in placement." (Lizette)

As previously noted, Lewis (2007, p.197) explained that the slippery slope arguments appear when contested social change is proposed. Endorsing the policy is reconceptualized as triggering inevitable lowered standards that later intervention could not redeem. Young (2006, p.323) identified that contradictions at the heart of RPL mean that emancipatory notions are undermined by overzealous processes seeking evidence of equivalence that provoke imbalance and exclusion. Similarly Price and Jackson-Barrett (2009) identify that controversy revolves around both the extent to which RPL might undermine

academic quality, and by what means RPL can be measured.

6.4   Recognizing a breadth of experiences: Measuring RPL

This theme captures participants' thoughts about how to measure RPL in a meaningful way. Again, lengthy discussion developed around measuring RPL. It was evident that Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants did not condone less-rigorous processes but supported fair and just processes. The new AASW Education and Accreditation Standards recognize that:

> "…students may enter their social work degree study program with a breadth of prior learning and experiences in the human services sector" and as such "credit for the field education placement, or part thereof, may be possible on the basis of recognition of prior work experience" (AASW, 2008, 4.3.5).

Almost all participants made practical suggestions about how RPL might be measured.

Threads of previous themes can again be evidenced here as participants recommended measurements that could mirror placement conversations. They suggested inclusive, socially just approaches to RPL that make non-academic knowledges more visible; they cautioned against "force fitting" past experience into a prescribed framework and weighed how measurement of RPL can be rigorous and meaningful, but not burdensome for the student or the university. The preferred measure for many participants was written work with a conversation about practice skills and knowledge, where the cultural background of the applicant is considered and all assertions are supported by documentation. These first quotes identify choice, conversations, and flexibility in measuring RPL:

> "I think choice…some people would be quite comfortable to do the written assignment others I think would be quite

daunted by the written, so face-to-face would be good… an informal setting around a table… without the hierarchy. A support person and a facilitator… Given the opportunity to 'tease out that knowledge' … not just 'fill out that form.' There's a lot of hidden knowledge. I believe a more flexible approach to recognition of prior learning—rather than dumbing down—would actually encourage greater learning … and if a person has knowledge from a client's perspective that also needs to be taken into account." (Lena)

> "Panels are scary, so two people (in placement you often have two people who provide support, someone from the university and your field supervisor)… sit down with the student and talk about 'what have you been doing in your practice,' perhaps do a written case study. It's just a bit of marking and certainly (takes) time and resources of the university (but) is not more excessive than doing supervision and placement." (Margaret)

> "I think I would say 'give us an example of why you think you should have RPL' … almost like applying for a job. The most important thing here is what were the outcomes? What strategies did you use? People assume because you got black skin that you know everything about Aboriginal culture, or Torres Strait Islander culture, which is not true. I think it comes back to method. The committee would need to weigh it up." (Doris)

> "If a social worker is willing to say 'I verify that this person has done these things and it is comparable with what happens in our third-year field placement experience,' and you can link it with knowledge, skills, and values that we would expect from a third-year student… I'm really thinking how onerous do we make this?" (Anna)

"An interview… because a verbal conversation can sometimes elicit more useful information…; if it's an Indigenous student, have an Indigenous staff member… I would lean toward saying 'yes' because a third-year placement doesn't cover all aspects." (Kathryn)

The following quotes note the role of the AASW and associated documents in guiding RPL processes:

"People sometimes know things but they can't demonstrate it… I suppose this is an area where perhaps there will be searching for more direction from AASW." (Conrad)

"Some sort of reference… who could vouch for you, but sometimes it might not be a social worker… you really should have been having some supervision. A series of questions that identify what core skills and knowledge you expect them to have. I am sounding very bureaucratic now with competencies springing to mind… Or leave it up to the person to name those things in language they understand? You don't want it that they just pick up the Practice Standards and then regurgitate, or try to fit their experience into that framework because they can easily do that, people are quite creative… it doesn't have any real meaning." (Sara)

Preempting recent changes, Wayne et al. (2006, p.167) called for valid measures to assess whether students could be exempt from part of the placement, or all of it, and they emphasized individualized programs that bolstered missing "theoretical knowledge" and were not just focused on measuring previously learned practice skills. Osman (2006, p.212) acknowledged that RPL could be perceived as a "soft option," yet applicants who developed RPL portfolios often

spoke of the onerous process. Of relevance, Peters (2006, p.168) identified issues of retrospective recall, where RPL applicants felt compromised by being required to force-fit past learning into a "manufactured self" to gain RPL, rather than having their skills and knowledge recognized and valued.

Equally, according to Dyson and Keating (2005), where data are available the data indicate that the use of RPL by Indigenous students in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector is lower than for other students. Further, they recommend that RPL processes need to take into account the traditional systems of passing on knowledge, and that there is a need to provide culturally appropriate support in measuring RPL such as use of elders to speak on behalf of the applicant and use of Indigenous assessors. Reflecting espoused AASW professional values in practice, one participant above called for the recognition of insider knowledge from a client/consumer perspective.

7.   Discussion

It seems apparent from the findings that participants recognized that some students had knowledge and skills "beyond the novice." Equally it was clear that a careful balance was required to recognize prior skills and knowledge, current learning needs, and the graduate skills and knowledge, including theoretical knowledge, vital for professional social work practice. Of interest, almost all participants noted that RPL might tip the balance toward lowered standards, although participants acknowledged a corresponding imbalance if overzealous assessment made RPL more arduous than doing the placement. It is not clear from the interviews or the limited available literature why the slippery slope of lowered standards was such a commonly described concept, although Lewis (2007) notes it is an argument often called up when contested social change is proposed.

At the completion of the interviews almost all participants favoured RPL in some form. Only

a very small minority maintained that the field placement is a unique experience that could not be replaced by RPL. Therefore it is speculated that most participants did not necessarily believe that RPL triggered an inevitable slide into lowered standards. Rather they cited common fears but endorsed RPL as contributing to a fine balance between the experiential and theoretical knowledge necessary for practice.

Revisiting the literature discussed above, Harris (1997, 2006) firmly located RPL in a political context, stating that if educators were serious about social redress they would want to highlight and advocate for recognition of forms of experiential learning that come from particular social conditions, that is, to recognize social and political experience and blend it with the support required for success in academic education.

As noted earlier, Breier (2005, p.55–59) identified three theoretical approaches to RPL. A *technical/market* perspective that prioritizes knowledge and skills of benefit to the economy and matches past informal learning against standardized outcomes; a *liberal/humanist* perspective recognizing that adult learners' prior knowledge should be valued, and providing opportunities for students to demonstrate reflective learning; and a *critical/radical* perspective. This last approach, underpinned by feminist, emancipatory, standpoint, and social constructivist discourses, recognizes that knowledge cannot be separated from history, sees "knowledge as situated," and seeks to "grant visibility in the academic environment to 'outsider knowledge'" (Breier, 2005, p. 58, citing Michelson 1996).

In these findings, technical/market, liberal/humanist and critical/radical perspectives all can be identified in participants' viewpoints. In particular, allowing different, marginalized and hidden knowledges to be tease(d) out was recommended by several participants. Of significance here, Breier (2005, p.59) also highlighted crucial disciplinary-specific considerations. Breier stated that "the nature and the structure of the discipline …, the relationship

between formal and informal knowledge within the discipline …, and the extent to which the pedagogic discourse mirrors that relationship" are vital in accommodating RPL.

In considering social work as a human rights profession and a discipline committed to social justice, as documented in the Code of Ethics (AASW, 2010), a *critical/radical* perspective on RPL seems a most befitting theoretical match. Equally, social justice, according to the new code (AASW 2010, 3.2, p.13) is a core professional obligation, and the social work profession promotes justice and fairness "by acting to reduce barriers and to expand choice for all persons." The Code (AASW, 2010, p.14) identifies anti-racist practice (citing Quinn, 2009) and "calls for the development of theories and practices which privilege understandings … and relevant cultural knowledge." Of relevance here, it is a *breadth of knowledge from experience,* and not a depth of theoretical social work knowledge that the new accreditation standards have recognized as credit worthy (*emphasis added)* (AASW, 2008, 4.3.5).

In keeping with the study findings and with social work as a human rights profession that is also committed to social justice, social inclusion and valuing experiential learning, it is recommended here that closer alignment to a *critical/radical* perspective could provide a relevant theoretical justification for RPL, and an ethical, social justice framework for future guidelines. From the literature available, there does not appear to be evidence that ethical standards are best upheld with a conservative approach to RPL. Further research dedicated to exploring all aspects of RPL in social work education, to build our evidence base on RPL, is highly recommended.

It is acknowledged here that fast track routes via RPL may well serve organizational, workforce, and individual agendas, rather than pedagogical ones, and therefore RPL policies should not be embraced uncritically. It is acknowledged that the new AASW RPL policy demonstrated leadership in a global social work context, and it is early days after implementation.

Yet is seems evident that some RPL policies inherently can have a confused, paradoxical epistemological standpoint (Watson, 2009), seemingly arguing for legitimate space for different knowledges, but requiring that they be cloaked in sameness. Required 'sameness' in social work RPL processes may not represent advancement of social justice or social inclusivity. This may be so particularly regarding respecting different knowledges such as experiential workplace knowledge, insider knowledge and Indigenous cultural knowledge in practice, thereby potentially breaching AASW's own espoused Code of Ethics.

Reflecting on the words of one participant above, AASW may need to be prepared for educators looking to AASW for more direction on RPL. It is recommended that in offering that guidance AASW could consider promoting closer alignment with a critical/radical perspective. This standpoint would decrease any discursive gap between social work's espoused theories, Practice Standards and Code of Ethics, and social work theories in use (Argyris & Schon, 1974). In turn, this standpoint would reflect closer alignment between the embodied philosophies of social work and RPL, and in the slightly misquoted words of one participant above regarding demonstrated practice—"would link it to values we would expect."

8. Conclusion

Participants in the study reported here considered that RPL was a fine balance between students' prior learning, their current learning needs, and the graduate skills necessary for professional practice. Some fears were expressed in the study about maintaining rigor and being mindful of potential lowered standards, while ascertaining what counts as knowledge. Revisioning RPL as broader than allowing *entry* is a step that has been taken by AASW, and a recent AASW policy shift has allowed RPL for field education in Australian social work programs.

Greater alignment between social work's core value of social justice and the original

empowering philosophies of RPL could be a next step. It appears that a discursive gap may exist between RPL as a process through which prior learning is retrospectively matched to the Practice Standards and Code of Ethics and a critical/radical standpoint that recognizes marginalized knowledges in social work learning processes. These findings have relevance for social work in Australia and in the international context where social workers and social work educators are pondering RPL as it relates to ethical social work practice, social work values, social inclusion, human rights, and social justice.

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