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**Towards professional identity: The development of the self  
among student social workers through storytelling**

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A full thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of Master in Social Work  
in the Department of Social Work,  
Faculty of Community and Health Sciences,  
University of the Western Cape

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Submission date: October 2023

## DECLARATION

I, Marika van Heerden, declare that this dissertation titled “**Towards professional identity: The development of the self among student social workers through storytelling**” is my own work and all sources that were utilised have been acknowledged in-text and in the reference list.

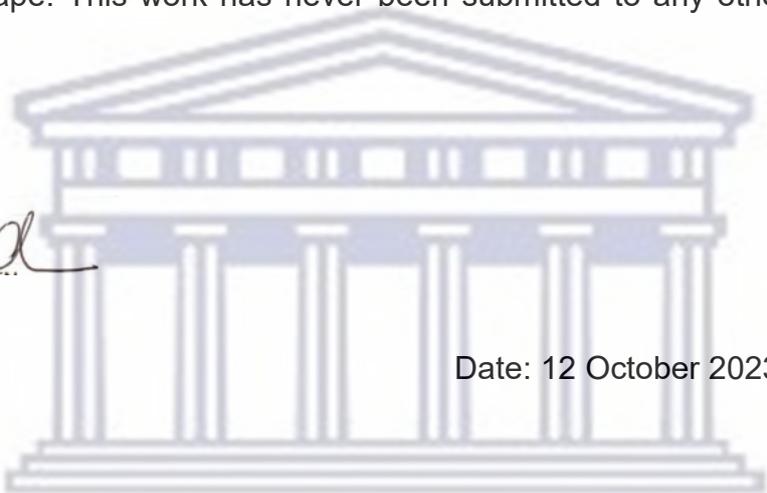
This dissertation is being submitted for a Master of Social Work degree in the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences, Department of Social Work at the University of the Western Cape. This work has never been submitted to any other institution for examination.



*Marika van Heerden*

Signed:

Date: 12 October 2023



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## ABSTRACT

This study responded to an identified need to explore ways to include personal experiences in learning and teaching activities to support the development of the self and professional identity formation. The research questions of how student social workers can be empowered to develop the self and the professional identity through storytelling, as well as how the Appreciative Inquiry model can be used as a framework for storytelling in learning and teaching activities guided the study.

The aim was to explore and describe 1) how storytelling can empower students to develop and integrate the self and the professional identity, and 2) how the Appreciative Inquiry model can be used as a framework for storytelling in learning and teaching activities.

From an interpretive paradigm, a qualitative research approach was followed with the support of explorative, descriptive, and contextual research designs. Non-probability purposive sampling was used to identify and include five permanent social work educators and 10 student social workers to participate in the study.

Data were collected through a semi-structured focus group with social work educators, and two focus groups with student social workers. The data were verified through the criteria of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

Avoidance of harm and debriefing opportunities, voluntary participation and informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and privacy, and the management and storage of data guided ethical practice.

The focus group with the educators and the first focus group with the student social workers centred on the first research question and aim. They described their perceptions and experiences regarding the development of the self-vis-à-vis professional practice through learning and teaching practices, current activities to stimulate the development and the integration of the self and the professional identity, and the potential of storytelling as a learning and teaching tool.

The second focus group with student participants addressed the second research question and aim, and highlighted their experiences of writing and telling their own stories of using the Appreciative Inquiry as a framework, and the potential thereof to integrate personal experiences with professional development.

**Keywords:** Appreciative Inquiry, Bachelor of Social Work Education and Training, Empowerment, Self and Professional Identity, Storytelling

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I would also like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the participants for their willingness to participate in this study. Without their invaluable contributions, this research endeavour would not have been possible.



## DEDICATION

*I dedicate this thesis to my beloved mother, Dr Anna-Marie du Toit – an unwavering scholar but also a gifted artist, whose life served as a profound example of perseverance.*

*Your unwavering determination has instilled in me the conviction that I can achieve far more than I ever imagined.*

*You always found a way, Mom.*



*Rest in peace*

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS/ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Appreciative Inquiry
BSW	Bachelor of Social Work
CHE	Council on Higher Education
DSD	Department of Social Development
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
IASSW	International Association of Schools of Social Work
IFSW	International Federation of Social Workers
L&T	Learning and Teaching
NLASW	Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
RSA	Republic of South Africa
SACSSP	South African Council for Social Service Professions
UN	United Nations
UWC	University of the Western Cape

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

This study was student-centred in nature as it focused on storytelling as a learning and teaching (L&T) tool. The aim was to support student social workers to construct their understanding of the self and their professional identities as a part of the learning experience (Bayram-Jacobs & Hayırsever, 2016). In support of this focus, the inclusion of personal experiences in social work L&T practices is advised by Dykes and Green (2015) who report that student social workers confirmed that their own life stories impacted on their ability to integrate theory and practice. Similarly, Van der Westhuizen et al. (2021) request that greater emphasis be placed on the core knowledge requirement of the development of the self in relation to professional practice, as outlined in the Bachelor of Social Work's (BSW) qualification standards (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2015).

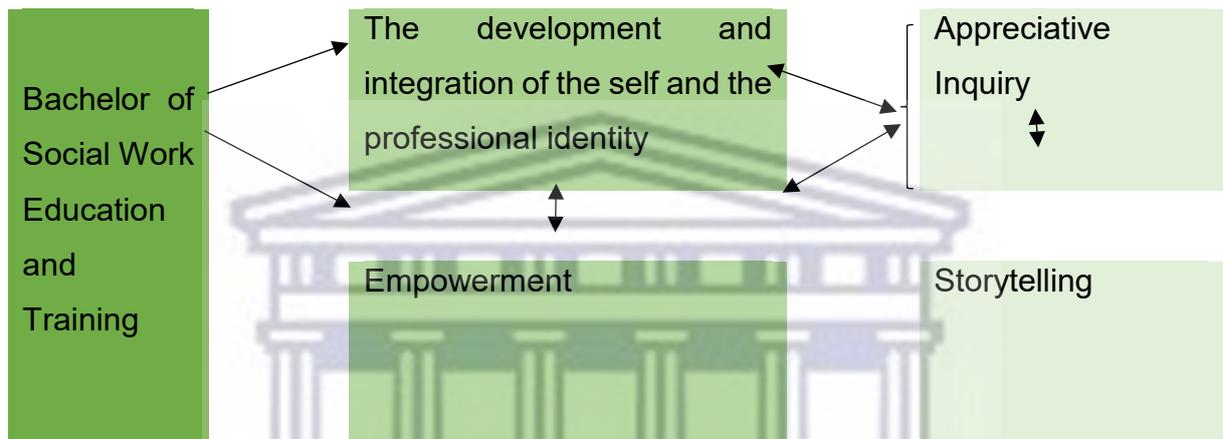
Andenoro et al. (2012, p. 105) refer to storytelling as an opportunity for students to reflect on how their personal life experiences influence their sense of self and their professional identities. They make a noteworthy assertion when quoting Ochs and Capps (1996): "Personal narrative is simultaneously born out of experience and gives shape to the experience". In this study, the researcher explored how storytelling, by employing the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) model, could contribute to the development and the integration of the self in relation to professional practice (CHE, 2015). San Martin and Calabrese (2011) share a similar perspective, emphasising the need for further research to investigate how narratives through the AI model could be included in educational practices to address personal aspects that may affect the learning process.

This first chapter serves as an introductory chapter to the study. It begins by presenting definitions of key concepts central to the research focus and proceeds with a preliminary literature review. This review informs the identification of the research problem, and the formulation of research questions, aims, and objectives. Furthermore, the chapter highlights the significance of the study in its specific field of

inquiry. It concludes by providing an outline of the thesis, giving the reader a clear 'road map' of what is to come in the subsequent chapters.

## 1.2 DEFINITION OF KEY CONCEPTS

The key concepts central to this study are: Appreciative Inquiry (AI); Bachelor of Social Work (BSW); education and training; empowerment; the self and professional identity; and storytelling. Figure 1 illustrates the interrelatedness of these concepts.



**Figure 1: Interrelatedness of the key concepts**

These concepts are defined below, and described in terms of how each concept relates to this study.

### 1.2.1 Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

The AI model was originally developed to encourage organisational development. It is often referred to as the four D's as it includes the following four steps:

- 1) **Discover** and value the best of what is present,
- 2) **Dream** of what might be,
- 3) **Design** and determine what should be, and
- 4) **Deliver** in terms of innovative actions towards the desired destiny (Cooperrider et al., 2008).

The use of AI has shifted to education in recent years. San Martin and Calabrese (2011) conducted research on the use of AI as an educational tool for at-risk students, revealing its ability to foster a respectful learning environment that incorporates students' real-life experiences in L&T practices. Similarly, Ogude et al. (2019) found that AI enhances student engagement, potentially leading to positive impacts on their overall learning experiences. This study further explored the use of storytelling within the AI framework as a L&T tool to support student social workers to develop and integrate the self and their professional identities.

### **1.2.2 Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) Education and Training**

Social work is both practice-based and academic in nature, which requires social workers to integrate theory in practice (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2014). To achieve this integration, social work education and training acknowledges the development and integration of the self and a professional identity as an essential outcome of L&T. As such, the CHE (2015) emphasises the importance of including the development of the self vis-à-vis professional practice in the social work curriculum. The aim is to support the student to develop a professional identity where the self is seen as an important intervention tool in practice.

This study focused on the development and integration of the self and the professional identity of student social workers as a core component of social work education and training. This focus within the AI model aligns with the recently developed Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW] & International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW], 2020). These standards stress the importance of incorporating self-reflective L&T activities to enable students to cultivate proficiency in self-reflection and self-awareness. Such activities enable students to recognise how their own values, beliefs, and biases can influence their understanding of social work values, knowledge, and skills.

### **1.2.3 Empowerment**

Empowerment is rooted in the belief in human potential, and it is fostered through education and capacity-building strategies aimed at enabling individuals to reach their

full potential and exercise control over their own destiny (Wendt & Seymour, 2010). This description aligns effectively with the AI model, which places a strong emphasis on empowerment as a means to achieve one's goal. To facilitate the development of a sense of self and a professional identity among student social workers through storytelling, empowerment was employed as a L&T practice. This approach aimed to:

- Provide student social workers with an improved chance of being heard,
- Assist them in exploring the meaning of previous and present experiences,
- Aid them in gaining greater control of their lives, and
- Enable them to find ways to develop and express their professional identities (Törrönen et al., 2013).

#### **1.2.4 Self and Professional Identity**

Webb (2015) asserts that describing the formation of a professional identity is a challenging task because diverse theories can be used to support different approaches. Nevertheless, and in line with the description of the development of a professional identity in the BSW programme (IFSW & IASSW, 2020), this author concurs that a professional identity is based on how social workers perceive themselves in their role, and this self-perception is rooted in their professional self-concept. The latter is shaped by attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences linked to the self. Confirming that the development of a professional identity is a key aspect of social work education and training, Holter (2018) adds that it encompasses aspects such as professional knowledge, skills, norms, behaviours, and values. In this study, the AI model was employed to explore how the development of the self through storytelling can contribute to the formation of a professional identity.

#### **1.2.5 Storytelling**

McAdams and McLean (2013) establish a connection between the development of the self and storytelling. They propose, within the framework of narrative inquiry, that the exploration of one's life story can facilitate the integration of past and present experiences, helping an individual discover a sense of purpose and meaning. Moreover, they argue that storytelling techniques can be employed to explore personal strengths and build resilience (cf. Törrönen et al., 2013). Storytelling, for the purpose

of this study, was framed in the AI model to explore how students can develop and integrate the self and a professional identity. Supporting this approach, Hodza and Rowe (2018) describe storytelling through the AI model as the process of narrating events, processes, and experiences.

These concepts provided the foundation for the researcher's initial literature review related to the study's focus.

### **1.3 PRELIMINARY LITERATURE REVIEW**

This section commences with an exploration of social work as a profession, followed by an overview of the BSW programme and the integral aspect of self-development and professional identity formation as part of BSW education and training. Subsequently, it delves into a discussion on the vulnerability of South African student social workers. As a culmination of the literature review, the section concludes with an examination of the concepts of storytelling and empowerment.

#### **1.3.1 Social Work**

Social work is guided by the following global definition:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing (IFSW, 2014).

In light of the definition provided above, the incorporation of principles such as social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities should be interwoven through the process of self-development in relation to professional practice in social work education and training. This integration is essential to ensure that students are adequately prepared to enter the profession. However, as noted by Wu and Pope (2019, p. 24), students "often impose their own moral judgment onto

different cultures ... Such reactions ... fail to invite reflection on our own cultural conditioning”. Educational praxis, such as storytelling, is therefore needed to integrate the development of the self and the professional identity in alignment with the principles delineated in the global definition of social work (cf. IFSW, 2014). In the current social and political climate in South Africa, where these principles are of utmost relevance, it is crucial to equip the next generation of social workers with knowledge, understanding, and skills to enable them to practice in accordance with these principles. This facilitates the development of the required professional identity.

To address the concern raised by Wu and Pope (2019) as mentioned above, the integration of the development of the self and the professional identity can be effectively achieved by placing a deliberate focus on stimulating self-reflection and self-awareness, as advocated by the Global Standards for Social Work (IFSW & IASSW, 2020), within the framework of education and training practices.

#### **1.3.1.1 Bachelor of Social Work**

In the pre-democratic history of South Africa, social work was entwined with unjust and oppressive practices (CHE, 2015). Consequently, it is of paramount importance that social work education and training be adapted to empower student social workers. They need to become cognisant and capable of addressing social issues through practices rooted in the principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities (IFSW, 2014). This imperative is underscored by the fact, as highlighted by the CHE (2015, p. 6), that “social work remains part of the government machinery”.

Aligned with the principles outlined in the global definition of social work (IFSW, 2014), the BSW degree programme is designed to foster social work education and training that places significant emphasis on cultivating a professional identity. This identity enables students to advocate for social justice, elevate human rights and well-being, and uphold human dignity (CHE, 2015.) The BSW programme encompasses a range of applied competencies and skills that are essential for a social work graduate to develop and consolidate their professional identity as a social worker. These competencies and skills include:

- a) “Understanding the Self as an important instrument of intervention;
- b) Demonstrated ability to understand the links between the personal and the professional dimensions of life and the relationship between the micro- and

- the macro-aspects of students' lives and the lives of people whom they engage with;
- c) Demonstrated skills in critical thinking and scholarly attitudes of reasoning, and openness to new experiences and paradigms; and
  - d) Ability to deal with complexity and ambiguity and to 'think on one's feet'" (CHE, 2015, p. 9).

Furthermore, the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP, 2020) endorses these requirements in its Norms and Standards for the BSW, stipulating that the BSW programme must reflect the philosophy, core values, skills, and knowledge of social work in the curriculum. As such, the delivery of the programme should facilitate the development of independent and reflective thinking. In this regard, the current study explored how reflective thinking can be stimulated through storytelling to bolster the development and integration of the self and the professional identity. This, in turn, will equip social work students to effectively engage with the philosophy, values, skills, and knowledge of the social work discipline.

### ***1.3.1.2 The development of self and a professional identity***

It is believed that individuals who embark on an introspective journey gain insight into themselves and strive to foster self-development (Andenoro et al., 2012). This study explored how storytelling can empower student social workers to cultivate self-awareness and acquire the attributes necessary for forming a professional identity. The professional identity enables them to engage, understand, and interact with others and their environment on a more conscious level, thereby enhancing their effectiveness.

Kessler (2013) describes AI as a framework where heightened awareness of the self and others can facilitate the transformation of relationships, particularly in the context of the professional relationship between a social worker and client systems. Andenoro et al. (2012, p. 105) support this perspective by arguing that "at any point in time, the sense of that which is given meaning, including ourselves, is an outcome of a person's subjective involvement in the world".

Holter (2018) links the development of a professional identity with the development of self. She argues that professional knowledge, understanding, and skills should undergo reflection to discern their alignment with personal values and

beliefs. Both Holter (2018) and Tseng (2011) refer to a process in education and training that supports the development and integration of the self and the professional identity. The process starts with the acquisition of knowledge, progresses to the cultivation of skills, and subsequently focuses on developing an understanding of how the values and principles of the profession correspond with one's own values and beliefs.

The descriptions mentioned above highlight that, in order for student social workers to develop the required professional identity, they will need to understand the profession in terms of their own background, environment, beliefs, and value systems through self-knowledge and awareness. To facilitate this process, the study explored storytelling as a L&T aid to enhance self-insight and as an intervention tool for integrating this newfound awareness into their professional identity. Furthermore, the study aimed to equip students with the skills necessary to apply social work principles effectively and contribute to a just society. To provide a foundation for this exploration, the researcher reviewed previous reports on the vulnerability of South African student social workers.

### **1.3.2 Vulnerability of South African Student Social Workers**

The term vulnerability, for the purpose of this study, refers to physical, emotional, social, and economic aspects that may put a person at risk when confronted with challenging circumstances (Proag, 2014). Therefore, social issues encountered in social work practice might relate to a student social worker's real-life experiences that will challenge them to engage with such issues effectively and professionally (cf. Dykes & Green, 2015). As such, while the development and integration of the self and the professional identity is acknowledged as a key focus of social work education and training (Holter, 2018), the vulnerabilities of student social workers in the South African context need to be considered.

Previous studies that have brought to light some vulnerabilities and needs among student social workers include that of Bozalek (2013), Carelse and Dykes (2013), Smit (2012), Collins and Van Breda (2010), and Hlalele (2010). Dykes and Green (2015), referring to the mentioned studies, concur that South African students in higher education primarily represent the so-called *first-generation students*. Froggé and Woods (2018) describe such students as those whose parents, guardians, and/or

primary caregivers have not been exposed to higher education. These students are the first generation that registered at higher education institutions (HEIs). Dykes and Green postulate that first-generation students are often viewed as “underprepared, coming from impoverished backgrounds in terms of economic strength, poor schooling and socio-cultural resources” (2015, p. 577). These authors further describe student responses as “typified by their narratives of distress, tearfulness, negative and struggling emotions, rationalising, and especially a fear of their own bias and partiality regarding particular issues that closely mimic their own” (2015, p. 589). As such, Dykes and Green (2015) recommend that social work education and training include

- Cognisance of the correlation between behaviour and emotions,
- The link with early experiences through self-awareness, and
- Understanding how this affects their clients.

Van Breda (2017) centred his research on the life challenges of *first-year students*, noting that these challenges have a significant impact on their academic performance. The real-life experiences in terms of family and community life include poverty and financial difficulty, exposure to crime, domestic violence, and drug and alcohol abuse in the family. These experiences can potentially render students vulnerable, subsequently affecting their studies and, consequently, their career trajectories.

In order to acknowledge the real-life experiences of student social workers and the influence thereof on their sense of self and their professional identity formation, the researcher considered storytelling as a potentially valuable L&T tool. It was argued that, through storytelling, they can explore how they can make sense of their own experiences, beliefs, and values to reach the goal of developing a professional identity that will enable them to implement the principles of social work (IFSW, 2014).

### **1.3.3 Storytelling**

Van der Westhuizen et al. (2017) advocate for the incorporation of an Afrocentric perspective into L&T, emphasising that this approach will better equip students for real-world practice. Achieving this goal entails recognising and integrating African cultural knowledge and understanding into educational practices. These authors refer to narrative inquiry as a means to facilitate the transformation of the curriculum, underscoring that students’ stories can guide their learning and development.

Similarly, the University of the Western Cape's (UWC) principles and guidelines for the transformation and renewal of the curriculum are designed to empower educational practices centred on students' expressed needs for a meaningful learning experience (UWC, 2021). In this way, storytelling becomes a meaningful experience for the student, while the stories of students can inform the transformation of the curriculum.

In advocating for the use of storytelling in educational practice, Bayer and Hettinger (2019) avow that everyone has a unique story to tell. Storytelling, therefore, serves as an effective tool to enhance communication in communities, and, in the case of this study, the academic community. In order to use storytelling to develop meaning through self-reflection, it must have a clear purpose, a personal and/or emotional meaning to the person, and a conclusion related to the main topic of the story.

For the purpose of this study, student social workers were instructed to create a story aimed at enhancing their comprehension of how the self impacts on their professional identities. The expectation was that by crafting and sharing these narratives, students would be motivated to integrate the growth of their self with the development of their professional identities. To underpin this anticipated outcome, Maclean et al. draw upon De Certeau (1984), who elucidates that storytelling aids in sense-making through "locating the self across time, space and context" (2012, p. 23). De Certeau (1984, p. 81) posited that "the story does not express a practice ... It makes it". In this study, the researcher was interested in exploring how storytelling can inform self-reflective practice to contribute to an awareness of what is needed to understand oneself as a person and as a social worker. Moreover, this awareness was linked to the principles of the social work profession. In this way, the storytelling activity becomes a L&T experience. This experience was aimed at empowering student social workers.

### ***1.3.3.1 Storytelling and empowerment***

The United Nations (UN) calls for empowerment initiatives to enable vulnerable individuals to realise their full potential (UN, 2012). Empowerment entails the development of both knowledge and skills on the one hand, while simultaneously creating conducive conditions for their effective application on the other hand. For the purpose of this study, a description of empowerment by Kathleen Ries, Board

President of Unanima International, as cited by the UN (2012), was used: Instilling in a person the awareness

- That they have the ability to take on tasks,
- To make a difference,
- To be an example to others, and
- To contribute their talents to a cause that can benefit others (UN, 2012, p. 10).

Storytelling can play a vital role in fostering this awareness and contribute significantly to the cultivation of a professional identity that equips student social workers for meaningful contributions to social work practice. It was envisaged that an effective L&T tool, such as storytelling, could align with and support an Afrocentric perspective (cf. Van der Westhuizen et al., 2017) in social work education and training, as well as foster the development of essential graduate attributes, including critical citizenship towards the social good, lifelong learning, and creative and collaborative problem-solving (UWC, 2016). Empowerment through educational practices (UN, 2012) can thus lead to the development of critical citizenship, where students become active contributors to social justice and care, and committed to lifelong learning in terms of a stance towards themselves where they understand the social issues related to the profession and their role within it (UWC, 2016).

AI was identified as the theoretical framework to empower student social workers to become self-reflective through storytelling, and in this way encourage the development and integration of the self and professional development.

#### **1.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study was interested in how student social workers can be empowered to develop and integrate the self and the professional identity through storytelling. AI served as the theoretical framework from which the researcher approached this study.

AI follows a *circular process* that entails four steps, as detailed in the definition of the key concepts. Van der Westhuizen et al. (2018) applied this process to examine how reflective practices can facilitate the development of awareness. They further explored how becoming aware of oneself while becoming aware of the context in which one functions, can contribute to transformation. Similarly, Bell (2010) argues that transformation requires transformative action, which includes learning, changing,

and doing. Hence, the utilisation of AI was directed towards examining how student social workers could receive assistance in gaining insights about their selves in the context of their profession. This approach also aimed to promote their awareness of their capacity to actively guide their personal development concerning both their self and the formation of their professional identity. The students were requested to choose one social work principle to reflect on, and were supported to write and tell their stories, using the following four steps (Van der Westhuizen et al., 2018; Cooperrider et al., 2008):

- *Discovery*: Appreciate the best of 'what is': Here the students focused on what they know and what they have experienced and were still experiencing.
- *Dream*: What might be? The students expressed what they thought was needed for them to address challenges and make sense of past experiences so that they could be empowered to address such challenges in practice.
- *Design*: What should be? Using the content of their stories thus far, the students described what they would do, why they would do it, how they would do it, and what resources they would need to address what is needed for the development of the self and the professional identity.
- *Destiny*: Reach for the dream. As a conclusion to their stories, the students described how the preceding steps had empowered them both personally and professionally, manifesting their envisioned outcomes.

Throughout the above steps, the students were reflecting on their understanding of the chosen social work principle and their knowledge and skills, as well as their personal experiences, and how these impacted on each other. At the end, they reflected on what they have learned, what changed due to the learning, and how this might have impacted on their development (cf. Bell, 2010).

The preliminary literature review and the theoretical framework were used to identify the research problem that provided the focus for this study.

## **1.5 PROBLEM STATEMENT**

A research problem is a topic of interest that the researcher wishes to explore and investigate, which forms the focus of the research study (Shoket, 2014). Kumar (2014) explains that the focus of the study, then, directs the steps that will be followed in the research process. This author asserts that crafting the research problem constitutes

the most pivotal phase in the research process, given that it distinctly elucidates the purpose and rationale behind the research study. The researcher used the preliminary literature review that explored existing knowledge focusing on the research topic, as well as the theoretical framework selected for this study, to identify and formulate the rationale for the study, as demonstrated in the following problem statement.

Social work education and training in South Africa is directed by the Global Definition of Social Work (IFSW, 2014), the BSW Standards (CHE, 2015), the Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training (IFSW & IASSW, 2020), and the Norms and Standards for the BSW (SACSSP, 2020). All of these documents point to the importance of the integration of the self and the professional identity as a part of L&T practices to ensure that the principles of the social work profession can be implemented effectively. However, a variety of authors have reported on the vulnerabilities of student social workers that impact on how own experiences affect learning and practice (Van Breda, 2017; Dykes & Green, 2015; Bozalek, 2013; Carelse & Dykes, 2013; Smit, 2012; Collins & Van Breda, 2010; Hlalele, 2010). As such, a need to find innovative ways to include personal experiences in L&T activities to support the development of the self and professional identity formation has been identified (Van der Westhuizen et al., 2021; Bayram-Jacobs & Hayırsever, 2016; Dykes & Green, 2015).

Wu and Pope (2019) advise that the integration of the development of the self and the professional identity can be achieved through a focus on stimulating self-reflection and self-awareness. With this need in mind, the AI model was identified as a framework to be included in educational practices to address personal aspects that may affect the learning process, while it also has been acknowledged that further research is needed in this regard (Ogude, et al., 2019; San Martin & Calabrese, 2011). The problem statement for this study was therefore that research is needed to explore how the AI model can stimulate reflective thinking through storytelling to support the development of the self and the professional identity in order to engage effectively with the principles of the social work profession.

The research problem was used to guide the formulation of the research questions, aims, and objectives that are presented next.

## **1.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Research questions are formulated in terms of what was identified as concerns or a lack of information on the topic of interest (Ratan et al., 2019). These questions provide a clear focus for the study, and are aimed at expanding knowledge and understanding of the research topic (Boet et al., 2012). The problem statement above highlighted the 'what' that needs to be explored further regarding the development of the self among student social workers through storytelling towards professional identity formation. Based on the research problem, the following research questions were identified for the purpose of this study:

- How can student social workers be empowered to develop the self and the professional identity through storytelling?
- How can the AI model be used as a framework for storytelling in learning and teaching activities?

## **1.7 RESEARCH AIMS & OBJECTIVES**

Research aims align with the research questions but go a step further by incorporating the significance and contributions of the study. The research objectives outline the research steps that will be followed to attain the aims of the research (Fouché & De Vos, 2011).

The research aims crafted for this study, with the purpose of addressing the research questions, are as follows:

- To explore and describe how storytelling can empower student social workers to develop and integrate the self and the professional identity.
- To explore and describe how the AI model can be used as a framework for storytelling in L&T activities.

In order to attain the above aims, the researcher identified the following research objectives for this study:

- To explore and describe current L&T practices regarding the development and integration of the self and the professional identity in social work education and training through interviews with student social workers and social work educators.
- To explore how storytelling can be used to encourage the development of self and professional identity in social work education and training through a storytelling activity with student social workers.
- To describe how a storytelling activity can be framed in the AI model to encourage the development and integration of the self and the professional identity in social work education and training.

The researcher envisaged that the attainment of the aims of this study would contribute to social work education and training.

## **1.8 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The researcher hoped that the findings of this study would provide context-relevant information that could enrich social work education and training. Guided by the AI model, the researcher sought to put forth recommendations regarding the utilisation of storytelling as a L&T tool within social work education. These recommendations aimed to assist students in cultivating self-awareness, consequently strengthening their professional identity. In this regard, the study's significance lies in its potential to foster innovative L&T practices that promote student development and empowerment. Consequently, these practices have the potential to bring about positive benefits for service recipients in the field.

## **1.9 LAYOUT OF THE THESIS**

The thesis is structured into six chapters as follows:

- **Chapter 1:** This chapter lay the groundwork for the study by providing definitions of key concepts, conducting a preliminary literature review, introducing the theoretical framework, presenting the problem statement, outlining the research questions, aims, objectives, and highlighting the study's significance.
- **Chapter 2:** This chapter expounds on the research methodology chosen for this study, together with the reasons for this choice and the implementation thereof.

- **Chapter 3:** This chapter provides an extensive exploration of existing literature concerning the key concepts of this study. This was used to compare and contrast with the research findings of this study.
- **Chapter 4:** The findings regarding student social workers and educators' descriptions of current L&T practices pertaining to the development and integration of the self and the professional identity in social work education and training are detailed.
- **Chapter 5:** This chapter presents the findings related to student social workers' experiences and perceptions on the use of storytelling through the AI model towards the development of the self and professional identity in social work education and training.
- **Chapter 6:** The thesis culminates with a summary, conclusions drawn from the research, and the presentation of recommendations for further action and exploration in the field.

## 1.10 CONCLUSION

This introductory chapter introduced the topic of the study and commenced by identifying and elucidating the fundamental key concepts that are essential to this research. A preliminary literature review, focusing on these concepts, explored what is currently known about the research topic. Additionally, the theoretical framework underpinning this study was presented and linked to the focus of the study. Subsequently, the research problem, questions, aims, and objectives were delineated. Thereafter, the significance of this study was expounded upon in terms of the envisaged contribution, and the layout of the research document was unpacked.

The next chapter will provide an exposition of the research methodology that was employed in this study.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

The previous chapter introduced the study through the exploration of key concepts pertinent to the study's focus. It also included a preliminary literature review that informed the identification of the research problem and the formulation of research questions, aims, and objectives. The chapter culminated with an explanation of the study's significance and an overview of the research document's structure.

The focus shifts in Chapter 2 to a description of the chosen research methodology, the reasons behind this choice, and the practical implementation thereof.

#### **2.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM**

A research paradigm is described by Kivunja and Kuyin (2017) as a philosophical way of thinking about the research topic, which informs the way in which the researcher will interpret the research data. Therefore, a research paradigm will influence how the researcher will approach the study, and the choices that will be made regarding the methods and techniques to collect and analyse the data (Morgan, 2007).

This study was conducted from the interpretive paradigm. This paradigm places significant emphasis on incorporating diverse perspectives of individuals related to the research problem, recognising the intrinsic value of subjective experiences, and acknowledging the social realities of people (Kivunja & Kuyin, 2017; Bryman, 2016). The characteristics of an interpretive paradigm, as described by Morgan (2007) below, informed the choice of paradigm for this study:

- The interpretive paradigm acknowledges that the social world can be understood through multiple and socially constructed realities, and not from the standpoint of one individual.
- To understand the social world of the participants, it is inevitable that there must be some kind of interaction between the participants and the researcher.
- Social realities are best understood when the context in which the participants live inform knowledge and understanding.

In this study, student social workers and educators reflected on how education and training support the development of the self and the professional identity, and what was further needed for them to explore the impact of their social realities on the development of their professional identities. The social realities of student social workers were included through storytelling, where the stories were aimed at assisting them to make sense of their own experiences and how it impacts on the development and integration of the self and professional identities. These stories also aimed to inform social work L&T practices in terms of how the curriculum can accommodate student narratives for students to use the self as an intervention tool in practice, and therefore as an integrated part of their professional identity.

### **2.3 RESEARCH APPROACH**

Quantitative research primarily aims to generalise findings and to ensure objectivity through standardised procedures (Robson & McCartan, 2016). In contrast, this study was interested in the subjective realities of student social workers and their educators, necessitating the use of a qualitative research approach. This approach aligns with the interpretive paradigm, utilising techniques such as narratives to capture the experiences and perceptions of individuals related to the research problem (Jensen, 2016). It acknowledges the context in which the phenomenon of interest occurs (cf. Morgan, 2007), and is particularly apt when new information is needed to address the research problem (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Typical characteristics of the qualitative research approach that were relevant to this study include:

- Qualitative research aims to contribute to a new understanding of the research topic, thus expanding the existing knowledge base. In this study, the researcher's focus was on how storytelling could empower student social workers in their journey towards developing and integrating the self and their professional identity. In this way, the aim was to make a meaningful contribution to social work education and training by explaining how the AI model can be used as a framework for storytelling in L&T activities.
- Interpretations were based on the experiences and perceptions of both student social workers and social work educators to describe the meaning they attached to the development and integration of the self and a professional identity.
- Data were collected in the natural environment of the learning and teaching context (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

The qualitative approach supported the researcher to explore the experiences and perceptions of student social workers and their educators of how the AI can stimulate storytelling as a L&T tool to encourage the development of the self and the professional identity. Their descriptions were used verbally to present the findings of this study (Jensen, 2016).

## 2.4 RESEARCH DESIGNS

The explorative, descriptive, and contextual designs supported the researcher in selecting appropriate methods and techniques for this study.

The *explorative research design*, aligned with the qualitative research approach, seeks to delve into a specific field of interest to expand existing knowledge (Ormston et al., 2014). This design was used to identify relevant methods and techniques for sampling and data collection. Through this design, the researcher was able to support the first two objectives of the study, namely:

- To explore and describe current L&T practices regarding the development and integration of the self and the professional identity in social work education and training through interviews with student social workers and social work educators.
- To explore how storytelling can be used to encourage the development of self and professional identity in social work education and training through a storytelling activity with student social workers.

The *descriptive research design* complemented the explorative research design by seeking to provide comprehensive details of situations through an in-depth examination of the data obtained from the exploratory research. This approach aimed to enhance the understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Ritchie & Ormston, 2014) and played a crucial role in guiding the selection of the data analysis method. This research design was instrumental in assisting the researcher in achieving the third objective of the study, namely:

- To describe how a storytelling activity can be framed in the AI model to encourage the development and integration of the self and the professional identity in social work education and training.

This study was conducted in the context of social work education and training. Therefore, the *contextual research design* was used to ensure that the findings relate to the context and focus of this study (Ritchie & Ormston, 2014; Ormston et al., 2014). The method and technique to identify the population and sampling were informed by this research design.

The research paradigm, approach, and designs were used to identify the relevant research methods to utilise in this study.

## **2.5 RESEARCH METHODS**

Research methods have to do with the empirical stage of the research. Punch and Oancea (2014) distinguish between the *pre-empirical* and the *empirical* stages of research. These authors argue that the identification and formulation of the research problem, the research questions, and the aims serve as activities in the pre-empirical stage. During this stage, the researcher is engaged in “setting up the research” (Punch & Oancea, 2014, p. 7). In this way, the research questions and aims that emanated from the research problem guide the selection of methods employed to address these questions and achieve these aims. This stage was explained and described in Chapter 1. In this section of Chapter 2, the empirical stage will entail a discussion of the methods of sampling, data collection, data analysis, and data verification.

### **2.5.1 Population and Sampling**

A research *population* encompasses all individuals, objects, and events that hold significance for the researcher (Bryman, 2016). Given the specific focus of this research study – namely, the utilisation of storytelling as a L&T tool in social work education and training to support student social workers in developing and integrating the self and the professional identity – two pertinent populations were identified:

- Social work educators at South African universities, and
- Student social workers at South African universities.

*Non-probability sampling* was the chosen method of sampling as the participants were selected based on specific pre-determined criteria (Ritchie et al., 2014). In line with the contextual research design, this method has to do with selecting a sample from

the research populating within a specific setting; i.e. the UWC for accessibility purposes (Fouché et al., 2021). The probability of inclusion in the sample cannot be predetermined prior to the study, thus rendering it impossible to establish the sample size at the outset of the research (Devlin, 2018; Kumar, 2014). Within this sampling method, the *purposive sampling technique* was used. Utilising this technique, the researcher exercised her judgment to discern the most appropriate criteria for selecting the sample, thereby ensuring that the participants were well-equipped to address the research questions (Kumar, 2014; Ritchie et al., 2014).

#### **Inclusion criteria for educators**

- Permanent lecturers in the Department of Social Work at the UWC
- With more than two years of experience in L&T in the BSW.

**Exclusion criteria** were lecturers with less than two years of experience in L&T in the BSW and those not employed permanently.

The **inclusion criteria** for student social workers were:

- Registered fourth-year student social workers
- Enrolled in the Department of Social Work at the UWC.

The reason for focusing on fourth-year students was their extensive exposure to L&T focused on the development and integration of the self and their professional identity over a period of time. This experience would enable them to reflect on what worked and what did not work.

**Exclusion criteria** were student social workers at the Department of Social Work at the UWC who were not in their fourth year of study.

*Data saturation* was used to determine the sample size. Fusch and Ness (2015) explain that data saturation is effective in interviewing as a method of data collection. It entails conducting interviews until researchers ascertain that no novel information is emerging. Nevertheless, Saunders et al. (2018) caution that saturation is also contingent on whether the research questions have been adequately addressed or not.

In this study, the initial aim was to incorporate four social work educators and 12 student social workers into the sample. Nevertheless, the researcher continuously evaluated whether the research questions had been adequately addressed and if the data had become repetitive. Consequently, the final sample size for this study consisted of five educators and 10 student social workers.

Upon obtaining ethical clearance (Annexure A), the researcher proceeded to seek permission to conduct research among students from the UWC Registrar's Office (Annexure B). Subsequently, the researcher established contact with educators and fourth-year students enrolled in the BSW programme of the Department of Social Work at UWC.

To initiate the process, an information letter was shared with the educators and student social workers (Annexure C). This letter served to invite them to participate in the study, while explaining the purpose and nature of the study. Interested educators and students were then invited to an online meeting, during which they had the opportunity to seek clarification and ask questions before making their decision to participate or decline. Participation in the study was voluntary. The participants signed informed consent forms (Annexure D) and focus group binding forms (Annexure E) prior to data collection. Once these steps were completed, the data collection phase could commence.

### **2.5.2 Data Collection**

Firstly, the researcher considered structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews as methods of data collection (Harding, 2019). *Structured interviews* involve presenting participants with a predefined set of closed-ended questions, which, in this qualitative study aimed at exploring participants' experiences and perceptions, were deemed unsuitable. *Unstructured interviews* are based on the overall research questions where the participants explore the research topic. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the researcher made use of *semi-structured interviews* to encourage the participants to fully explore the topic while the researcher made use of probes to further encourage them to give all the information they deemed relevant to the research topic (Harding, 2019).

Secondly, the researcher considered individual interviews and focus group interviews as methods of data collection. *Individual interviews* have the value of

providing participants with a safe space to share experiences and perceptions related to sensitive topics. While the researcher considered the fact that student social workers might have been exposed to sensitive life experiences that may impact on the development of the self and the professional identity, the use of storytelling as an L&T tool required the sharing of experiences. For this reason, she opted for *focus group interviews* as it contributes to exploring shared understandings, or different viewpoints, and therefore contributes to rich data (Harding, 2019)

Three focus groups were used to encourage an interactive exploration of the research questions to collect the research data:

- 1) A focus group with lecturers exploring their perceptions and experiences regarding current activities to stimulate the development and the integration of the self and the professional identity, as well as storytelling as a potential L&T tool.
- 2) Student focus groups reflecting on current L&T experiences that support the development and the integration of the self and the professional identity, as well as storytelling as a potential learning tool.
- 3) A focus group to explore storytelling through the AI model as a tool to develop and integrate the self and the professional identity.

The following semi-structured questions, included in an interview guide (Annexure F), guided the focus group discussions:

#### **Questions to social work educators**

- What are your perceptions and experiences regarding the core knowledge requirement of the development of the self vis-à-vis professional practice, as stipulated in the BSW's qualification standards?
- What current activities are you using to stimulate the development and the integration of the self and the professional identity?
  - In what modules do you include these activities?
  - What works well?
  - What challenges/limitations are you experiencing?
- What do you think of the potential of storytelling as a learning and teaching tool?

## Questions to student social workers

### *Focus group 1:*

- What learning and teaching activities assisted you thus far to develop your sense of self and your professional identity?
  - In what modules do these activities take place?
  - What works well?
  - What challenges/limitations are you experiencing?
- What do you think of the potential of storytelling as a learning and teaching tool?

### *Focus group 2:*

This focus group with the same students who participated in the first focus group consisted of an introduction session, four sessions focusing on storytelling framed within the AI model, and a conclusion session. The introduction and storytelling sessions were not used as a part of data collection, but as a preparation for data collection in the conclusion session. The content of the different sessions is described below.

#### *Introduction session*

The principles of social work were presented to the group of participating students. They were asked to choose one principle that they wanted to focus on in their stories. Next, they were given some guidelines to use when writing their stories, including the framework of how to introduce the story, how to frame the content of their story, and how to draw a conclusion to end the story. The participants were also informed that they would write four sections on their story, which will be shared in the focus group. They were therefore asked to choose topics and content that they would be comfortable with to share with other students in the focus group.

#### *Session 1 – Discovery: Appreciate the best of 'what is'*

Participating students were asked to choose a principle of social work and think about how this principle has been experienced in their own lives. They were then requested to write about this experience and reflect on how it has been impacting on their studies and their professional development, while identifying challenges that they experience.

### *Session 2 – Dream: What might be?*

The participants continued to reflect and write about what they think is needed for them to address challenges and make sense of past experiences. This process aimed to empower them to effectively address these challenges in their professional practice.

### *Session 3 – Design: What should be?*

Using the content of their stories thus far, the participants described what they will do, why they will do it, how they will do it, and what resources they will need to address what is needed for the development of the self and the professional identity.

### *Session 4 – Destiny: Reach for the dream*

As a conclusion to their stories, the students described how the preceding steps had empowered them both personally and professionally, manifesting their envisioned outcomes.

### *Concluding session*

Students were asked to reflect on their experiences regarding storytelling within the AI framework. The following semi-structured questions were used to collect the data during this session.

- How did you experience the opportunity to write your story?
- How did you experience sharing your story?
- How did the four sections support you to develop your story?
- What worked best for you?
- What did not work well for you?
- How do you think this can assist you to implement the principle you chose in practice, while also considering your own experiences?

Based on the potential sensitive nature when exploring the self among student social workers, the researcher provided them with a confidentiality binding form (Annexure E) and assured the participants that what they share is entirely their choice (Harding, 2019). They were requested to sign the informed consent and confidentiality binding forms prior to data collection. The researcher also arranged for a social worker to be available to provide debriefing should the participants be upset in any way by their participation.

Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher followed required protocols. Interaction with the focus group educators took place online. Data collection with the student social workers took place face-to-face. The researcher ensured that a ventilated room was used, everybody sanitised, wore a mask, and that social distancing was practised.

Data were audio recorded with the permission of the participants, and transcripts of all focus groups, with field notes of non-verbal data, were done immediately after the focus groups (Rutakumwa et al., 2019).

A **pilot study** was also conducted with the first two focus groups. The pilot studies ensured that the methods support the researcher to answer the research questions, and also reflected on the questions to see if they were relevant to address the aims of the study (Malmqvist et al., 2019).

### 2.5.3 Data Analysis

A thematic data analysis was conducted by the researcher and an independent coder to identify the main themes, sub-themes, and categories emanating from the data. This method of data analysis supports the identification of themes that assist the researcher to answer the guiding research questions (Clarke & Brown, 2013). The steps, according to the description of Maguire and Delahunt (2017) (cf. Clarke & Braun, 2013) that were followed, as well as the implantation thereof, are described in the table below.

**Table 1: Data analysis steps and implementation (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017)**

STEPS	APPLICATION
1. Become familiar with the data	Once all the data were collected, the researcher read through all the transcripts, making notes of some ideas that came to mind. She then compared these ideas with the research questions and aims of the study. During this step, it was noted that the research questions of the study were indeed answered.

2. Generate initial codes	The researcher then revisited each transcript and identified keywords that encapsulated the participants' descriptions. These keywords were used as codes to place in a margin next to the relevant scripts. She then carefully re-read all the transcripts to ensure that codes were given to all the topics discussed by the participants.
3. Search for themes	At this point, the researcher took all the codes and carefully considered what codes could be grouped together. Each group was then described to reflect the focus of the data, which served as the initial themes.
4. Review themes	The researcher went back to the transcripts and placed the verbatim quotes related to the different themes under each theme in a separate document. Following this, she then reviewed the themes in terms of the research questions and aims. She also looked at whether the quotations related to the wording of themes, and identified sub-themes and categories within each theme.
5. Define themes	At this point, the researcher revisited the wording of each theme, describing each theme in terms of its relevance to the research topic.
6. Write up	As a final step, the researcher was able to write up the findings, using the verbatim quotes to present the participants' descriptions, and comparing this with the literature described in Chapter 3.

Throughout this study, the researcher was conscious about the verification of the qualitative data. This will be discussed in the next sub-section.

## 2.6 DATA VERIFICATION

Kivunja and Kuyin (2017) emphasise the importance of trustworthiness and authenticity in qualitative data obtained from an interpretive research paradigm. They advocate for the application of Guba's (1981) criteria for verifying qualitative data, which encompasses credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

These criteria were considered and implemented by the researcher, as discussed below.

### **2.6.1 Credibility**

*Credibility* pertains to the researcher's assurance that the findings accurately represent the information provided by the participants (Jordan et al., 2015). The researcher transcribed all focus group recordings and employed verbatim quotations from the participants to present the findings. Interview techniques, including probing, encouragement, and attentive listening, were instrumental in facilitating the participants' comprehensive exploration of the questions. The credibility of the data was further reinforced through data triangulation of methods of data collection and sources of data (Anney, 2014).

### **2.6.2 Dependability**

The *dependability* of qualitative data was determined through an in-depth description of the implementation of the methodology and the research process in the chapter (Anney, 2014). Through this description, it was assumed that if the same methods and techniques would be repeated in the same context, the findings would remain the same (Kivunja & Kuyin, 2017).

Furthermore, in this study, dependability was bolstered through an audit trail, where the research process was meticulously documented (Anney, 2014). Ongoing discussions with the supervisor took place to critically evaluate the implementation of the methods and techniques, and the findings were juxtaposed with existing literature to enhance dependability.

### **2.6.3 Transferability**

Kivunja and Kuyin (2017) assert that *transferability* focuses on efforts to provide enough contextual data about the participants so that findings can be compared to other contexts. Kumar (2014), however, concurs that transferability can be problematic, as contextual data might not be relevant in other contexts.

This study was contextual in nature, but the researcher considered that the findings might be valuable for other social work education and training programmes. Therefore, she included a thick description of the methodology and its implementation,

conducted the study within a theoretical framework, and made use of triangulation (included more than one population and sample) to contribute to transferability. However, the findings of this study should be interpreted within the context in which it took place.

#### **2.6.4 Confirmability**

*Confirmability* refers to how the findings reflect the perceptions and experiences of the participants, and how the potential bias of the researcher is managed (Berger, 2015; Anney, 2014). To safeguard confirmability, the researcher enlisted an independent coder to ensure that verbatim quotations served as the basis for describing the findings. Additionally, the researcher practiced reflexivity and engaged in supervision to reflect on her own perspectives and their potential impact on the interpretation of the findings.

Throughout the execution of the research methods, ethical principles in social research were meticulously observed.

### **2.7 ETHICS**

Ethics in research encompasses several key elements, including voluntary participation, ensuring that the study's outcomes benefit society and contribute to the knowledge base of relevant disciplines, and identifying and minimising potential risks prior to the study (Devlin, 2018). With particular focus on social research that includes the participation of human beings, Bless et al. (2013) recommends that findings should contribute to the lives of the participants, and that these findings must be shared with the relevant role-players.

In this study, the researcher considered the following aspects to include in the study to ensure ethical practice: Avoidance of harm and debriefing, voluntary participation and informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and privacy, and data storage and management.

#### **2.7.1 Avoidance of Harm and Debriefing**

Favaretto et al. (2020) emphasise three guiding principles for researchers to prevent harm to participants: respect, beneficence, and justice. Each of these principles underscores the importance of identifying and effectively managing potential harm to

safeguard participants (Strydom, 2011). To avoid harm, the researcher should also consider the benefits of the study (beneficence) and take all necessary measures to ensure that participants are not exposed to undue physical, social, and emotional harm. Both possible risks and benefits should be provided to the participants prior to their participation (Reinecke Flynn & Goldsmith, 2013).

In this study, the potential risks and benefits of participation were outlined for the participants in the information letters (Annexure C). In the pre-data collection phase, the participants were encouraged to express any potential harm or concerns they anticipated, allowing for these issues to be addressed prior to data collection. Participants had the opportunity to ask questions during the introduction session, where all fourth-year student social workers were informed about the study, allowing them to seek clarification on any concerns before deciding to participate. Additionally, they were given the contact numbers of the researcher and her supervisor if they wished to discuss any concerns further.

The online platforms could only be accessed by the participants, and they were provided with choices to determine times to meet to reduce the risk of interrupting their day-to-day lives. During the face-to-face interviews, all COVID-19 protocols were followed to ensure that the participants were not exposed to physical harm. These interviews took place in a venue that provided privacy. In addition, a social worker was arranged to be available to the participants for debriefing should they require this during or after their participation (Devlin, 2018).

### **2.7.2 Voluntary Participation and Informed Consent**

During an introduction session, the fourth-year student social workers and the social work educators were provided with the following information:

- The nature of the study,
- The research questions,
- The research aims,
- The methods of data collection, and what participation would entail, as well as
- The ethical considerations and practices.

The participants were also made aware that participation was voluntary, that they would not be disadvantaged for not participating in the study, and that they could withdraw their participation at any point of time (Bless et al., 2013). Based on this

information, and once they agreed to participate, they were asked to sign informed consent forms (Annexure D).

### **2.7.3 Anonymity, Confidentiality and Privacy**

According to Harding (2019) and Novak (2014), confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity all have to do with the management of personal information, referring to the safe keeping of such information (also see section 2.7.4 below).

In this study, *anonymity* refers to the degree to which the identity of the participants was protected by keeping all personal information separate from the transcripts. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym, and the document linking these pseudonyms to the participants' real identities was accessible only to the researcher and supervisor (Novak, 2014).

*Confidentiality* was maintained by having the participants in the focus groups sign confidentiality agreements, and by ensuring that no association could be made between the findings and any individual participant (Novak, 2014). Therefore, the findings were a collective description of all the participants' input without reference to a specific participant.

*Privacy* was upheld by conducting face-to-face interviews at venues where the participants felt secure and not exposed. Online interviews were restricted to participant access only. Additionally, privacy was safeguarded through diligent data storage and management practices (Novak, 2014).

### **2.7.4 Data Storage and Management**

Hard copies of all personal information and data sets have been securely stored in a locked space accessible only to the researcher. Digital documents are saved on a password-protected computer in a password-protected shared folder, accessible only to the researcher and her supervisor. All documents will either be shredded or permanently deleted five years after the conclusion of the study.

## **2.8 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This study was conducted at one university and in one year-level in the BSW programme. The findings should therefore be interpreted within this context. Experiences and perceptions of both student social workers and educators at other universities, in different provinces, and at various year-levels may vary from what is reported in this study.

While it is worth noting that the data collection process was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and experienced delays, it did not have a significant impact on the overall integrity and validity of the study.

## **2.9 CONCLUSION**

This chapter provided an overview of the chosen research methodology and its implementation for this study. The researcher expounded on the study's conclusion from an interpretive paradigm, affirming the utilisation of a qualitative research approach. The explorative, descriptive, and contextual designs were described and linked to this approach.

Furthermore, the research methods were elucidated by highlighting the two populations relevant to this study. The methods of sampling, data collection and analysis, and data verification were described in terms of the choice that was made and how the different methods were implemented. The ethics that guided this study were discussed, and the limitations of this study were acknowledged.

The next chapter presents an in-depth literature review. The concepts of social work, the sense of self, professional identity formation, interpretation, resilience, storytelling, and appreciative inquiry will be unpacked.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

Chapter 2 presented the research methodology that was used to obtain the findings of this study. This provided a scientific framework from which the researcher approached the study, which contributed to the verification of the qualitative data. The methodology that was chosen was based on the research problem, questions, aims and objectives as described in Chapter 1. The first chapter also included a preliminary literature review to indicate what is currently known about the research topic, and what needs to be explored further.

Chapter 3 extends the preliminary literature review by delving deeper into the available literature on the research topic. In this literature review, the researcher analyses what is known and utilises it to compare the research findings with. Arshed and Danson (2015) refer to this type of literature review as a 'narrative literature review', emphasising its comprehensive presentation of existing literature related to the research topic.

This chapter focuses on social work, the development of the self, the development of a professional identity, hermeneutics as an approach for interpretation, resilience, storytelling, and the AI Model.

#### **3.2 SOCIAL WORK**

Social work is defined by the SACSSP Policy as follows:

A profession that promotes social change, problem-solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work (2018, p. 9).

In accordance with this definition, the utilisation of storytelling as an educational tool within this study centres on its intended educational impact. It prioritises the consideration of the personal experiences of student social workers, rather than

emphasising a therapeutic role, in guiding students towards the development of their professional identity. The above definition is supported by the definition of social work, as provided in Chapter 1 where social work, as a practice-based profession and an academic discipline, is described in terms of the use of principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities aimed at the promotion of social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people (IFSW, 2014).

From the definitions of social work above, it is evident that the principles, values, and ethics of the profession are central to its aim. Chechak (2015) explains that the principles are central to the goal and mission of the profession as they direct the profession's priorities. The author affirms the problem statement of this study as formulated in Chapter 1, which highlights the need to find innovative ways to include personal experiences in L&T activities to support the development of the self and professional identity formation (cf. Van der Westhuizen et al., 2021; Bayram-Jacobs & Hayırsever, 2016; Dykes & Green, 2015). In this regard, "... social work professionals bring their own diverse worldviews and personal values to practice, and must anticipate the eventuality of personal professional value incongruence" (Chechak, 2015), 2015, p. 41). Wu and Pope (2019) and Chechak (2015) assert that students' previous life experiences and their own cultural backgrounds can influence their moral judgement. They argue that students should acquire the skills necessary to establish a professional identity that harmonises with their personal identities, all while upholding the fundamental principles of the profession.

Furthermore, social work in South Africa is based on the developmental approach. The SACSSP Policy (2018) refers to this approach as,

[T]he practical and appropriate application of knowledge, skills and values to enhance the wellbeing of individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities in their social context. It also involves the implementation of research and the development and implementation of social policies that contribute to social justice and human development in a changing national and global context (p. 9).

Linking the developmental approach with the social work principles, the Framework for Social Welfare Services (DSD, 2013a, p. 13) describes the purpose of this approach as, amongst others, to “protect and promote the rights of populations at risk, address oppression and discrimination arising not only from structural forces but also from social and cultural beliefs and practices that hamper social inclusion” and to “contribute significantly to community building and local institutional development”. The DSD (2013a) discusses developmental social work in terms of its relation to social development, and acknowledges that the different interpretations can lead to vagueness. However, it is noted that the focus of developmental social work has to do with the approach social workers follow when working with individuals, families, and communities. The aim of this approach is to work towards social equality that addresses the past injustices of the apartheid era.

Within the above description of social work and the developmental approach, a social worker in South Africa is required to possess a four-year BSW degree on Level 8 of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). All practicing social workers must be registered with the SACSSP in terms of the Social Service Professions Act (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1978). One of the key functions of the SACSSP is to provide guidance and oversight for the professional conduct of social workers. In terms of this study, the regulation of conduct encompasses ethical behaviour and professional conduct, which are guided by the principles outlined by the SACSSP, particularly when engaging with stakeholders in social work practice (SACSSP, 2018). An important aspect of social workers' responsibilities lies in their legislative mandates, which necessitate that their knowledge and skills should include relevant legislation and policies to be able to conduct statutory functions.

In order for social workers to follow a developmental approach, and to work towards social equalities and improve social functioning and quality of life, they should identify priority and vulnerable groups, as listed in the Framework for Social Welfare (DSD, 2013a, p. 30):

- Children,
- Youth,
- Women,
- Older people,
- People with disabilities, and
- Internally displaced people.

Social workers should furthermore be knowledgeable and skilled to render services at different levels of service delivery whilst having certain outcomes in mind for the specific vulnerable group(s) benefiting from services. Current legislation suggests prevention, early intervention, statutory/residential/alternative care, and reunification and aftercare as levels of service delivery within the Framework for Social Welfare Services (DSD, 2013a).

**Table 2: Levels of service delivery** (DSD, 2013a, pp. 32–35)

Service levels	Types of services
<p><b>Prevention:</b></p> <p>The focus is on strengthening and building capacity, self-reliance and resilience while addressing individual, environmental and societal factors to create conditions that enhance or support wellness. Services are focused on preventing development needs from developing into social challenges or risks.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Educational programmes</li> <li>▪ Capacity building and empowerment programmes</li> <li>▪ Life skills programmes</li> <li>▪ Awareness programmes (child abuse, women abuse and gender-based violence, substance abuse, etc.)</li> <li>▪ Early Childhood Development programmes</li> <li>▪ Substance abuse prevention programmes</li> <li>▪ Marriage preparation programmes</li> <li>▪ Parenting programmes</li> <li>▪ Advocacy</li> <li>▪ Information and advisory services</li> <li>▪ Diversion programmes</li> </ul>
<p><b>Early Intervention</b></p> <p>Services focus on the early identification of risks, behaviour and symptoms in individuals, groups and communities that could negatively impact on social well-being. The services are aimed at limiting the impact of the risk and preventing the development/progression of social problems. The focus is on early detection of symptoms to prevent social problem progression.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Food banks</li> <li>▪ Soup kitchens</li> <li>▪ Housing</li> <li>▪ Disaster relief programmes</li> <li>▪ Employment support/job placement</li> </ul>

### **Statutory/Residential/Alternative**

At this level, service beneficiaries' quality of life or social functioning is compromised. It could require some form of statutory intervention, or it could require the movement of service beneficiaries from the most empowering to the most restrictive environment as they can no longer function adequately in the community.

- Foster care
- Adoption
- Diversion programmes
- Court preparation
- Divorce Mediation
- Alternative care programmes
- Mediation and intermediary services

### **Reunification and Aftercare**

The aim of this level of service delivery is to enable service beneficiaries to regain self-reliance and optimal social functioning in the least restrictive environment possible. It facilitates reintegration into family and community life after separation. It also refers to the building of optimal self-reliance and social functioning in residential care.

- Reunification
- Community safety programmes
- Vocational programmes
- Probation supervision
- Home based care and support
- Residential care and support
- Supervision programmes

The South African society grapples with a multitude of socioeconomic issues that affect individuals, groups, and communities in diverse ways. According to Lorraine and Molapo (2014), homelessness and poverty represent substantial challenges that have far-reaching effects on the South African population, influencing not only their material well-being but also shaping their perspectives on the world.

### **3.2.1 Principles that Guide Social Work Practice**

Social work practice is fundamentally obligated to uphold ethical standards, guided by the core principles of the profession. In alignment with the Global Definition of Social Work (IFSW, 2014), this study places a particular focus on the principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities as essential guiding principles.

### **3.2.1.1 Social justice**

The term “social justice”, as described by Deranty (2015), revolves around the notion of fairness related to the distribution of life chances within a specific community. In social work practice, the term also includes the protection of service users from all forms of abuse and injustices (DSD, 2013b). The responsibility of social workers is, among others, to promote social justice by challenging various forms of discrimination and institutional oppression (IASSW, 2018). According to the IASSW (2018, p. 4), discrimination can be based on aspects such as “physical and/or mental abilities, age, culture, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, language, religion, spiritual beliefs, political opinions, socio-economic status, poverty, class, family structure, relationship status and nationality (or lack thereof)”. In addition to addressing discrimination, the DSD (2013a), as outlined in its Framework for Social Welfare Services, suggests that social justice within social work involves ensuring that resources are distributed in accordance with need, priorities, and historical imbalances.

### **3.2.1.2 Human rights**

This study aligns with the definition of human rights as outlined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA, 1996). In this guiding document, human rights are linked to equality, freedom, and social justice. To actively support human rights, social workers adopt a rights-based approach that guides their actions in promoting the human rights, dignity, and worth of all individuals. According to the SACSSP (2018), ensuring human rights includes respecting privacy and maintaining confidentiality, as well as upholding self-determination and autonomy within the legal frameworks that guide the profession. Fostering human rights also necessitates that social workers remain aware of and actively work to eliminate biases stemming from differences among individuals.

### **3.2.1.3 Collective responsibility**

Collective responsibility aligns with the above descriptions of social justice and human rights. Within the social work profession, it is recognised that human rights should coexist with a sense of collective responsibility towards practices rooted in social justice.

According to the international definition of social work, collective responsibility is manifested in social work practices that recognise and implement interdependence among individuals and between people and their environment. It encompasses a genuine concern for and takes responsibility for each other's well-being (IFSW, 2014). The DSD (2013a) also underscores the importance of collaborative efforts between the public and private sectors, civil society, and training and research institutions as a prerequisite for the practice of collective responsibility.

#### **3.2.1.4 Respect for diversities**

In order for different cultures to recognise, appreciate, and embrace their diversities, cultural sensitivity is required to serve as a foundation for respect and acknowledgement of individuals and groups in a society (Mogorosi & Thabede, 2018). Intercultural sensitivity is composed of open-mindedness and non-judgemental attitudes that enable people to develop and display a sensitivity toward other cultures, their differences, as well as accepting those differences. This aligns with the perspective presented by the Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers (NLASW 2019), which emphasises that education and training of social workers must include knowledge, understanding, and skills to be able to work within the cultural context of clients. Mogorosi and Thabede (2018) take this one step further, asserting that this is a continuous process of learning and professional growth.

To be able to practice social work where respect for diversity is evident requires an understanding of and commitment to the fact that cultural diversity is central to social work practice (cf. DSD, 2013b). Therefore, at the core of social work lies the importance of valuing and embracing diverse cultures. It is equally crucial for social workers to be aware of their own culture, values, and beliefs, and to understand how these factors shape both their own worldview and those of other individuals and groups. This becomes especially significant in the context of South Africa, a diverse society where historical injustices still cast a long shadow and continue to impact interactions among various groups (Van der Westhuizen et al., 2015).

### 3.3 SENSE OF SELF

Various attempts to define the concept of “a sense of self” have led to the conclusion that this multifaceted construct cannot be adequately captured by a single definition (Koh & Wang, 2012). From a social psychology perspective, Simon and Trötschel (2008) assert that the self and identity are interconnected, encompassing various psychological experiences, including:

- Thoughts,
- Feelings, and
- Motives.

These experiences inform an individual’s understanding of the world and their place within it. Expanding on this, Oyserman et al. (2012) add that it is an individual experience of something that has to do with the person and the environment/context they live in. These authors explain that a positive sense of self results in a warm, or pleasant, emotional experience.

The development of the self also relates to:

- Self-concept,
- Self-knowledge,
- Self-awareness, and
- Identity (Oyserman et al., 2012; Simon & Trötschel, 2008).

All of these concepts have to do with patterns of repeated cognitive activities, where the person processes information and experiences within a social environment (Oyserman et al., 2012; Simon & Trötschel, 2008). In support of this description, Simon and Trötschel (2008) advise that, to develop a sense of self, an individual has to engage with the question of: “Who am I?” Therefore, the development of the self is a process of self-understanding, stemming from the interaction between the person and their social environment.

Rasheed et al. (2019) also posit that the development of the self is a cognitive process, emphasising its deliberate engagement with one’s own inter-, intrapersonal, and contextual experiences. These activities necessitate that individuals engage in reflective processes concerning their own characteristics, abilities, perceptions, emotions, motives, and opinions (Simon & Trötschel, 2008). In this way, sense is

made of what is experienced, and this leads to the development of the self. Building upon Rasheed et al.'s (2019) perspective, Carden et al. (2021) encapsulate the preceding discussion by concluding that self-development hinges upon self-awareness and an understanding of one's experiences, representing a dynamic journey of self-discovery.

Reflecting on the use of self in social work, Barnard (2015) identifies three aspects, namely:

- 1) The self that directs relationship-building,
- 2) The understanding of self as an instrument of intervention, and
- 3) The dynamic nature of self-development as a part of ongoing learning.

The author above contends that social work education and training can facilitate the cultivation of the self as an integral aspect of professional identity development. This occurs when students are able to perceive themselves as members of a professional collective with shared objectives and values. Reflective learning and an auto-ethnographic approach to L&T, such as storytelling, can contribute to both the development of self and professional identity (Barnard, 2015).

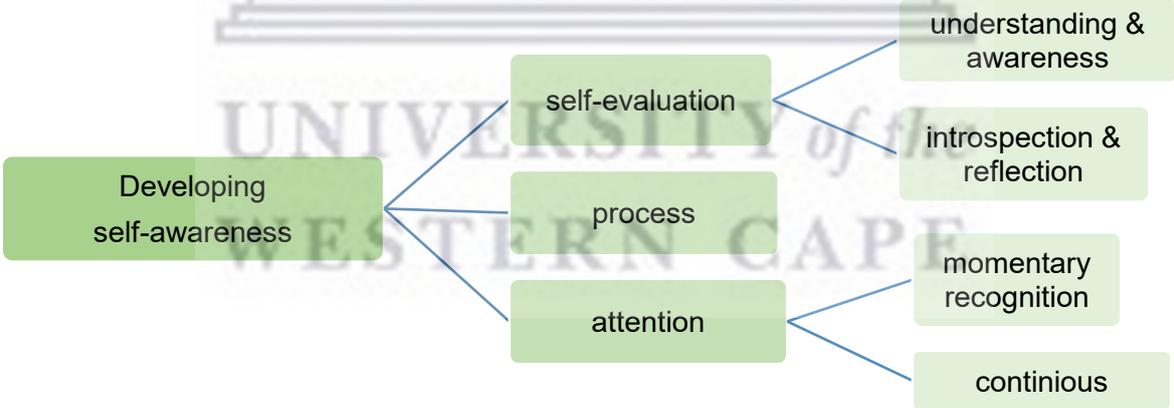
### **3.3.1 The Development of a Sense of Self**

The importance of developing a sense of self as a component of social work education and training is widely recognised and emphasised by the BSW qualification standards (CHE, 2015). In this study, the central thesis posits that when self-awareness is incorporated in L&T practices, the process of self-development towards a professional identity, as an integral part of preparing for practice, involves student social workers recognizing the significance and relevance of self-awareness.

In addition, an understanding is needed of how self-awareness can impact on interventions. In contrast to this perspective, Barnard (2015) cites Johnson and Williams (2007), who argue that a robust sense of self is not necessarily a prerequisite in social work practice. They contend that the capacity to engage with the values of others is of greater importance for social workers to be responsive and effective in their roles. Nevertheless, this study recognizes that personal experiences, as exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, have an influence on the well-being and performance of individuals, including social workers and student social workers (Ashcroft et al., 2022; Zvomuya, 2021).

Concerning experiences during their academic studies, Díaz-Jiménez et al. (2020) discuss the pandemic's effect on the mental well-being of students and its subsequent influence on their academic progress, as well as their personal and professional development in preparation for their careers. This notion finds support in the work of Oyserman et al. (2012), who underscore that behaviour is shaped by one's experiences and the way individuals perceive themselves within these experiences. Hence, the manner in which social workers or student social workers perceive themselves is influenced by a combination of their personal and professional experiences, which subsequently impacts their professional actions.

In alignment with the discourse on the importance of self-development within the social work profession, Carden et al. (2021) elucidate the role of self-awareness as twofold: comprehending oneself and comprehending how one's actions can affect others. These authors describe the development of self-awareness as encompassing the development of the self in terms of self-evaluation, a process, and attention. Achieving this requires continuous understanding and awareness, introspection and reflection, and momentary recognition. The figure below illustrates this description.



**Figure 2: Developing self-awareness** (Carden et al., 2021)

Carden et al. (2021) also delineate seven components of self-awareness, asserting that individuals must grasp each component to foster self-awareness and a sense of self. These components are concisely presented in the following table.

**Table 3: Seven components of self-awareness** (Carden et al., 2021, pp. 19–21):

Component of self-awareness	Description and explanation
1. Beliefs and values	Self-perception on a person-in-environment level has to do with belief and values that influence behaviour and responses. Self-awareness focusses on an introspection of where beliefs and values come from, and how beliefs and values influence behaviour and responses.
2. Internal mental state	A self-aware person is able to identify, name and describe emotions. It also requires that a person is able to understand where emotions come from, and how it influences the mental state in terms of how one thinks about a situation.
3. Physical sensations	Physiological responses to a situation, for example the fluttering of the heart, are described as physical sensations. Through self-awareness the person can draw a link between the situation, beliefs and values, and mental state to explain these responses.
4. Personality traits	Through self-awareness, a person understands strengths and weaknesses. It also refers to an understanding of personal resources or characteristics that can support or hamper development.
5. Motivations	An awareness of the ‘why’ behind behaviours results in an understanding of motivations as personal reasons that inform actions and responses.
6. Behaviours	This interpersonal component influences others as it has to do with how others see and hear behaviour. Behaviour is an external and visible conduct that can affect others and their responses to the behaviour they observed.
7. How one is perceived by others	This awareness is mostly derived from feedback and responses from others. The ability to be aware of the feedback received can assist with an understanding of how the self affects others.

For student social workers to become skilled to be self-aware, and to continuously develop the self as an intervention tool, the above components need to be included in

the social work curriculum through various L&T activities and tools. The above components of self-awareness are acknowledged and supported by other authors who agree that a conscious awareness and understanding of the self leads to an understanding of behaviour and choices that impact on others (Rasheed et al., 2019; Eckroth-Bucher, 2010). This awareness and understanding, then, contributes to further and continuous self-development (Pompeo & Levitt, 2014). To positively connect the self and professional behaviour, Rasheed et al. (2019) and Eckroth-Bucher (2010) postulate that the ability to objectively reflect on those aspects that influence the self can consciously and authentically guide behaviour and the formation of a professional identity.

### **3.4 PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY**

A professional identity has to do with how one regards oneself in one's career, and how one communicates or describes it to others (Neary, 2014). In order for student social workers to become able to fulfil and occupy a worthy place in the social work profession, the development of a professional identity is an integral part of social work education and training. Discussing the importance and value of the inclusion of professional identity formation in the curriculum, Wiles (2017) argues that to possess a sense of professional identity does not only provide a framework from which to interact from with other professions, but also strengthens the ability to manage stress within the work environment.

The social work profession is aimed at responding to the contextual realities of service users, which requires an understanding of the responsive nature of the professional identity of social workers (Turton & Schmid, 2020). Wiles (2017) underscores that the ongoing changes within the profession, along with shifts in the education of student social workers, necessitate the continual development of the professional identity. Through this assertion, the link between the self and professional identity as a continuous process (cf. Carden et al., 2021) is accentuated.

The importance of consistently examining the professional identity of social workers in the South African context is highlighted by Turton and Schmid (2020), who argue that educational practices have been moulded by the historical colonial and apartheid influences in South Africa. These authors advocate for the inclusion of activities in L&T that promote awareness, introspection, and reflection (cf. Carden et al., 2021) regarding the aspects that shape professional interactions with service

users. Strategies such as student participation, critical thinking, and student self-awareness, related to the principle of respect for diversities, are proposed by Turton and Schmid (2020). Expanding on this viewpoint, Wiles (2017) further emphasises the fact that professional identity may be understood differently across a multicultural spectrum, and therefore, when defining professional identity, flexibility is a significant factor to be kept in mind if one intends to accommodate different cultures. This should, however, not compromise the core nature and professionalism of social work.

### **3.4.1 The Development of a Professional Identity**

Much like the development of the self, the cultivation of a professional identity involves a process (cf. Carden et al., 2021) that hinges upon the integration of professional knowledge, skills, and an understanding of the principles that underpin professional practice (Holter, 2018). Agreeing with this description, Spilková (2018), in her examination of the formation of professional identity among students in the field of education, agrees that the construction of a student's 'professional self' necessitates awareness and understanding of both professional *and* personal values, suppositions, and thoughts, among other factors. Holter (2018) further cites Tseng (2011), who posited that after internalising the elements mentioned above, students can gradually come to understand the profession through the lens of their own values and beliefs. Thereafter, they can align themselves with the core values of social work as a profession, ultimately leading to the cultivation of their professional identity.

Holter (2018) regards social work education and training as a developmental process during which students gradually and systematically develop and acquire a professional identity. This author elucidates the components of this process, which initiates with the acquisition of knowledge in L&T, progresses through the interactions during L&T, and ends in a developmental experience that contributes to their personal understanding of what the profession means to them (cf. Neary, 2014). In terms of interactions in L&T that culminate in the development of the professional identity, Tseng (2011) suggests that exposing students to case studies and activities of role play, for instance, will support the integration of what they know, how they know it, and how it relates to their professional identities.

Spilková (2018) describes the components of a professional identity that can be included in the curriculum as 1) self-image, 2) self-esteem, 3) self-efficacy, 4) job

motivation, 5) perception of job demands, 6) prospects, and 7) personal conception. These components are summarised in the table below.

**Table 4: Seven components of professional identity** (Spilková, 2018, p. 119)

Component of professional identity	Description related to the social work profession
1. Self-image	Perception of myself as a social worker.
2. Self-esteem	Am I good at what I do?
3. Self-efficacy	Am I mastering social work efficiently?
4. Job motivation	Why am I a social worker?
5. Perception of job demands	What do I aim to achieve as a social worker?
6. Prospects	What is my perception of my future as a social worker?
7. Personal conception	My conceptualisation based on my knowledge and beliefs.

Spilková (2018), in agreement with Holter (2018), concludes that gradual and systematic education and training methods where the student is guided through a process of self-awareness are effective for developing professional identity.

Hermeneutics as an approach through which student social workers can interpret the self and the professional identity will be discussed next.

### 3.5 HERMENEUTICS AS AN APPROACH TO INTERPRETATION

The development of a sense of self is closely tied to one's ability to reflect on how personal experiences shape one's self-perception (Oyserman et al., 2012). This, in turn, plays a pivotal role in the cultivation of a professional identity, necessitating awareness, introspection, and reflection (cf. Carden et al., 2021). This section explores hermeneutics as an interpretive approach aimed at promoting self-development and professional development.

The essence of hermeneutics lies in understanding oneself and effectively communicating that understanding. Consequently, any endeavour to establish meaning in any given situation signifies an engagement with hermeneutics (Zimmermann, 2015). It is equally important to recognise that engaging in hermeneutics encompasses not only the effort to understand but also the effort to effectively convey one's understanding.

Zimmermann (2015) elaborates on the term “understanding” by stating that it is more than the awareness of mere knowledge. It is also the realisation of the deeper meaning of knowledge, as well as the incorporation of these facts into the context as a whole. This results in the conclusion that hermeneutics has also to do with interpretation, which George (2021) confirms when arguing that interpretation is the focus of attention in hermeneutics. Zimmermann (2015) additionally highlights that comprehension and interpretation are grounded in cultural awareness and first-hand experience. In the context of this study, the pertinent emphasis lies on the student social worker's understanding and interpretation of the self, considering their personal and cultural experiences, and how these interconnect with their professional identity.

The German hermeneutic philosopher, Dilthey, held the position that understanding is the key to human sciences (Grondin, 1994). Van der Westhuizen et al. (2018), acknowledging Dilthey's viewpoint, assert that experience can be described as the first-hand feeling of a situation, and that understanding can be developed through exploring this experience to affix meaning to it. In this way, hermeneutics may be viewed as subjective in nature, because it acknowledges that previous experience plays a major role in how we interpret current experience. These authors postulate that hermeneutics is circular in nature, as it requires a continuous reflection on what is being experienced. They argue that this process is not stagnant, and that each reflection contributes to a different understanding through interpretation. Therefore, the circular process of understanding and interpreting could be viewed as a spiral. This is accentuated by George (2021) who refers to the ‘circularity of understanding’. Cole and Avison (2007) identified three phases in a hermeneutical spiral, described by Van der Westhuizen et al. (2018) as follows:

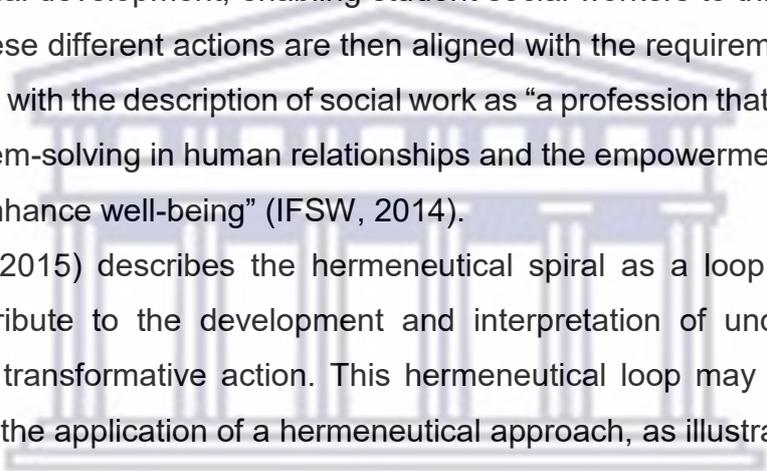
- *Understanding*: Involves reflecting on one's feelings, thoughts, and actions in the present situation.
- *Explaining*: Encompasses expressing one's understanding and listening to the expressions of others.
- *Interpreting and reconstructing*: Entails reflecting on responses to one's own understanding and on what others have expressed in order to develop a new or different understanding.

For the purpose of this study, adopting a hermeneutical approach to L&T is seen as valuable for incorporating previous experiences, sharing these experiences, and

reflecting on how this sharing can lead to a fresh or modified understanding of the self and professional identity. The process of sharing experiences not only influences the development of a new understanding but also fosters an awareness of the experiences of others. The goal of ongoing engagement with these phases is to encourage reflection, sharing, and a return to reflection, all aimed at fostering development.

In this regard, Van der Westhuizen et al. (2018) speak of change that may take place through Cole and Avison's (2007) phases in terms of transformative action that occurs through learning, changing, and action (cf. Bell, 2010). In this way, the inclusion of reflective learning may contribute to transformation that could support both personal and professional development, enabling student social workers to think, feel, and act differently. These different actions are then aligned with the requirements of practice. This correlates with the description of social work as "a profession that promotes social change, problem-solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being" (IFSW, 2014).

Harris (2015) describes the hermeneutical spiral as a loop where different activities contribute to the development and interpretation of understanding that contributes to transformative action. This hermeneutical loop may be viewed as a guide towards the application of a hermeneutical approach, as illustrated in the figure below.



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**Figure 3: The hermeneutical loop** (Harris, 2015)

The practical nature of the core components of the hermeneutical loop is described by Van der Westhuizen et al. (2018), and related to this study as follows:

- *Living daily life*: Students reflect on their own views and prejudices related to a specific social work principle in order to understand the reason for their feelings, thoughts, and actions.
- *Call to adventure*: Understanding the worth and advantage of this reflection and engagement with other students on the matter is indicated by a willingness to continue with the process.
- *Possible exit*: Some students may initiate the process but find the engagement with reflections and sharing of experiences challenging, resulting in a resistance to participate. These students will, therefore, demonstrate a lack of readiness or preparedness for change and may choose to exit. Conversely, others embrace the requirements for transformation and continue to participate. Importantly, participation should be voluntary, and students who exit might return once they are ready to participate at a later stage.

- *Investigate more possibilities*: The students who stay in the process will initiate conversations with fellow students, sharing their insights and receiving input from others. In this manner, increased openness is fostered, enabling a deeper understanding of both oneself and others.
- *Road of Trials*: Through storytelling activities, students reflect individually or collectively to uncover additional explanations for their actions, feelings, and thoughts. They become capable not only of attributing meaning to these aspects but also of exploring alternative meanings that resonate with their experiences.
- *The Abyss*: Here, conflicting information, experiences, and interpretations may surface, and students are encouraged to persist in their reflections and the sharing of their experiences and insights, even in the face of these differences.
- *Transformation*: Here, the learning and transformation that have occurred up to this point are linked to possible options for change in actions/behaviour/responses.
- *Consolidating changes*: The changed actions/behaviours/responses are practiced.
- *Decision to integrate changes*: The new ways become integrated into the modified way of living, and the transformed feelings, thoughts, and actions merge with the preparation for professional identity.
- *Return to everyday life*: The learning, changing, and doing of the transformative action within the above components are integrated to form part of the self and professional identity.

By fostering the development of the self and professional identity in social work education and training through a hermeneutical approach to interpretation, the objective is to promote awareness, introspection, and reflection (cf. Carden et al., 2021). This can contribute to, among others, resilience, enabling individuals to effectively cope with stress experienced in both personal and professional contexts.

### **3.6 RESILIENCE**

Student social workers in South Africa experience a number of psychosocial and socioeconomical challenges, or vulnerabilities, that may impact on their engagements with academic work, and also on their readiness to enter practice (Van Breda, 2017). Hence, factors such as poverty and financial hardships, exposure to crime, violence, and substance abuse, social exclusion, inequality, and discrimination, as well as

unhealthy lifestyles (Van Breda, 2017; Aldiabat et al., 2014), can be viewed as elements that may influence both personal and professional development.

Dykes and Green (2015) and Siyengo (2015) further refer to so-called 'first-generation' students. These students are the first generation in their families to access higher education, and their personal and academic experiences are being influenced by various factors, including the fact that their families are unable to provide the preparation expected by HEIs due to a lack of socio-cultural support and resources, financial constraints, and the added challenge of English as an additional language (Dykes & Green, 2015). This description illuminates the fact that personal contexts may impact on professional development. Dykes and Green (2015) recommend in this regard that L&T practices should provide a space where students are supported to reflect on how their personal experiences affect their engagement with social work practice.

The vulnerabilities mentioned above highlight the necessity of cultivating skills that contribute to resilience. This aligns with the perspective of De Las Olas Palma-Garcia and Hombrados-Mendieta (2014), who agree that social work L&T should incorporate an approach aimed at developing and enhancing individual components to support students' well-being. This requires attention to expression of constructive emotions, interpersonal competence, and resilience. These authors further underscore the link between personal development and professional identity formation by explaining that personal well-being is of utmost importance to student social workers because it fosters "a deeper commitment to professional practice" (p. 393). Van Breda (2017) also argues that the personal and professional worlds of students cannot be separated and advocates for the inclusion of both the academic and personal contexts of students in educational practices.

Two overarching schools of thought underpin the field of resilience: trait resilience and process resilience. Liebenberg et al. (2020) clarify that *trait resilience* refers to an inherent character strength within an individual, which plays a crucial role in achieving positive outcomes when confronted with adversity. *Process resilience* pertains to the interaction between an individual and their environment, thereby characterising resilience as a multi-faceted concept that takes into account the broader contextual factors. The authors posit that process resilience is cultivated within a particular context that provides support and encourages outcomes that exceed initial expectations.

For the purpose of this study, the researcher considered that storytelling in L&T acknowledges personal and academic contexts, and can, from a hermeneutical perspective, contribute to a learning process that supports process resilience. Importantly, Liebenberg et al. (2020) assert that individuals who engage in process resilience activities should take part consensually, and that activities must include a focus on specific elements, as listed in the table below.

**Table 5: Elements of process resilience** (Liebenberg et al., 2020, pp. 18–24)

Element	Description
Individual Assets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Intelligence and cognitive abilities</li> <li>▪ Executive function</li> <li>▪ Problem-solving skills</li> <li>▪ Easy temperament</li> <li>▪ Positive affect</li> <li>▪ A positive outlook or emotions</li> <li>▪ Sense of humour</li> <li>▪ Effective self-control or self-regulation</li> <li>▪ Creative thinking</li> <li>▪ Agency and self-efficacy</li> <li>▪ Adaptability and competence</li> <li>▪ Faith or spirituality</li> <li>▪ Meaning-making framework</li> </ul>
Relational Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Secure, trusting, nurturing, and caring relationships</li> <li>▪ Stable and accepting relationships</li> <li>▪ Relationships with primary caregivers/parents, siblings, family, extended family, peer group, life partners, friends, colleagues, educators, mentors, significant other adults, and professional supports</li> </ul>
Contextual Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Educational opportunities</li> <li>▪ Recreation opportunities</li> <li>▪ Community cohesion, routine, and structure</li> <li>▪ Socioeconomic factors</li> <li>▪ Service provision and related policies</li> <li>▪ Spirituality, religious, cultural, and civic engagement</li> </ul>

Storytelling as a tool in L&T attempts to create meaning for the student, referring to the relationship between personal experience and how it leaves them vulnerable in the context of the profession. The researcher anticipates that through storytelling, student social workers will be able to recognise how their personal experiences influence their personal and professional development. They can also integrate new experiences by sharing their own stories and gaining insight into the experiences of others. In this way, they can discover novel approaches to identifying individual strengths, as well as relational and contextual resources.

### **3.7 STORYTELLING**

#### **3.7.1 Storytelling and Hermeneutics**

Storytelling is a time-honoured and deeply ingrained tradition of the human race, serving as a means to pass on information and knowledge from one generation to the next. Ketelle (2017) underscores that the transmission of stories from one generation to another plays a crucial role in imparting values and valuable lessons. Lugmayr et al. (2016) describe storytelling as a deliberate process in which stories are shared for both entertainment and educational purposes. These narratives serve the dual purpose of preserving cultural heritage and conveying lessons learned to future generations.

Bringing the development of self and a professional identity together, Barnard (2015) proposes L&T practices that encourage an auto-ethnographic approach to reflective learning that will contribute to self-awareness. This is in line with the thoughtful process, as described by Lugmayr et al. (2016).

In the context of sharing stories, Ketelle (2017) elucidates that we make sense of our own experiences by conveying them to others, simultaneously gaining insights into the experiences of others by listening to their stories. Storytelling serves as a facilitator for the exchange of experiences.

In terms of a hermeneutical approach, Van der Westhuizen et al. (2018) assert that in order to foster awareness that contributes to personal development (cf. Zimmermann, 2015), the interpretation of experiences is essential. The authors postulate that expression converts experiences into meaning. As such, storytelling is one L&T tool that can be used within such an approach.

### 3.7.2 Aristotle's Elements of a Good Story

The Interaction-design Foundation (n.d.) refers to Aristotle's description of the elements of a compelling story as follows:

- a) *The plot*: What is the story about? What are the characters doing? Here, student social workers identify a story or experience related to a social work principle that affects them.
- b) *The character*: What are the traits, backgrounds, needs, aspirations, and emotions of the main characters? Here, the student explores how the plot affects the character(s) in their stories.
- c) *The theme*: What is the main obstacle experienced that directs the focus of the story? This element involves making sense of how the experience (the plot) influenced the character's development of self and professional identity.
- d) *The dialogue*: What are the expressions about? What emotions are conveyed? In this phase, students connect the plot and theme to how the character responds to the situation.
- e) *The melody*: According to Aristotle, stories are effective when emotions and convictions are being shared in such a way that it stirs emotions that motivate a quest for solutions. Students begin to explore what needs to happen to ensure that a solution is found that will positively influence their development.
- f) *The décor*: What is the context in which the story is taking place? This element focuses on information that points to obstacles and opportunities that must be acknowledged when attempting to find a solution.
- g) *The spectacle*: Are there any plot twists in your stories? What is the moment or event that changes the direction? Students are encouraged to explore what needs to change or what must occur for them to develop their self and professional identity – the magic moment when they become capable of attributing new meaning to their experiences.

### 3.7.3. Purpose of Storytelling

The aim of storytelling, for the purpose of this study, is to facilitate students' self-reflection and self-awareness, empowering them to gain insights into their experiences and thereby allowing them to construct meaning based on their newfound understanding of those experiences. The study therefore aimed to empower and

enable student social workers to understand how the self influences the development of their professional identity in relation to the principles of social work. The AI model can be perceived as a framework designed to facilitate storytelling, thereby contributing to the cultivation of process resilience. This, in turn, supports the development of the self and professional identity.

### **3.8 APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY (AI)**

#### **3.8.1. AI: Approach vs Philosophy**

On the one hand, Cooperrider et al. (2008) describe AI as a *philosophy* that seeks to promote transformation or positive change. On the other hand, Sandars and Murdoch-Eaton (2017) describe AI as an *approach* with the central goal of harnessing strengths to facilitate transformation. Therefore, AI operates from a foundation of existing strengths and strives to unlock the potential of individuals. Both references to AI as a philosophy and an approach underscore its strength-based nature and its objective of developing participants' potential by 1) exploring mutual strengths, 2) encouraging dialogue, and 3) sharing experiences (Cooperrider et al., 2008).

Storytelling as a collective activity supporting lifelong learning and a positive student-centred L&T experience (cf. UWC, 2016) within the framework of AI focuses on:

- Indicating positive intent,
- Creating dialogue,
- Improving communication,
- Establishing mutual vision,
- Expediting learning by emphasising victories,
- Uniting people, and
- Encouraging continual transformation (Cooperrider et al., 2008, p. 20).

#### **3.8.2 The 4-D Cycle of AI**

Hodza and Rowe (2018), referring to other authors with similar positions, concur that storytelling, or the sharing of experiences and perceptions, is central to AI. This study explored the AI model to incorporate storytelling in the process of transformation by supporting, developing, and integrating the self and professional identity of student social workers as a L&T tool. Consequently, the study utilised the 4-D cycle of AI, as

outlined by Cooperrider et al. (2008), while also integrating Aristotle's elements of effective storytelling (Interaction-design Foundation, n.d.) as a framework.

- 1) **Discover:** The primary task of this phase is to identify “what is”, involving the exploration of current experiences. Participants approach this with a positive intent, seeking to identify the positive aspects they want to make use of going forward. In the case of this study, student participants were encouraged to choose a social work principle and identify how their experiences of that principle influenced the meaning they attributed to it.

In terms of Aristotle's elements (Interaction-design Foundation, n.d.), they were instructed to develop the plot by defining the story's content and identifying the characters involved. They were urged to focus on a "positive possibility" rather than viewing events as unalterable. Additionally, they were asked to pinpoint the theme or obstacle that must be addressed for positive change to occur.

Dialogue plays a pivotal role as a tool that connects the plot and the theme to the nature of the experience, acknowledging the emotions experienced by the character(s). It also encompasses the characters, as student participants examine how traits, backgrounds, needs, aspirations, and emotions contribute to the plot. Cooperrider et al. (2008) underscore that every question in this phase is framed positively, making it all about discovering the positive core of the experience.

- 2) **Dream:** Following the discovery phase, as elucidated by Cooperrider et al. (2008), this phase revolves around collectively envisioning what is possible in the future, with a focus on recognising and valuing common themes. In this context, student participants expanded upon the theme element (Interaction-design Foundation, n.d.) by describing the obstacles that impact their experiences and their interpretation of the chosen social work principle. In the realm of AI, this entails exploring an aspect that influenced the participant's development of self, and for the purposes of this study, their professional development as well (Cooperrider et al., 2008).

The experiences explored during the discovery phase are now being envisioned in terms of future possibilities. It is crucial to consider how students connect the plot and the theme in this phase. The possibilities for the future generate enthusiasm and a sense of anticipation, and participants transition from discussing what is or what was to dreaming and imagining what can be. The element of melody, as a component of storytelling (Interaction-design Foundation,

n.d.), fosters positive emotions that, in turn, stimulate the envisioning of potential solutions, ultimately establishing a sense of purpose for a positive effect and future development (cf. Cooperrider et al., 2008).

- 3) **Design**: During this phase, which builds upon the positive foundation and exploration of future possibilities from the first two phases (Cooperrider et al., 2008), concrete images of what will be are put forth and termed "possibility propositions", which are expressed in the present tense. This phase integrates elements of the past (what was), the present (what is), and the future (what can be). As a result, it serves as a bridge between the positive aspects from the past and the potentialities of the future while also addressing obstacles. Aristotle's *décor* element is closely related to this phase, as it involves identifying information that highlights both obstacles and opportunities that must be acknowledged when seeking solutions (Interaction-design Foundation, n.d.).
- 4) **Destiny**: This phase is the conclusion of the cycle, but it is also the start of an ongoing process of dialogue, exploration, learning, and development. It brings a sense of purpose (Cooperrider et al., 2008). Here, participating students were encouraged to identify the *spectacle* element of their stories, which represents the magical moment when new meaning is attached to experiences (Interaction-design Foundation, n.d.). They concluded their stories with a description of a vision for including the identified principle in the way they develop themselves and their professional identities.

### 3.9 CONCLUSION

This chapter delved deeply into various topics, including social work, the development of the self, the development of a professional identity, hermeneutics as an approach for interpretation, resilience, storytelling, and the AI Model. It offered an extensive overview of the existing literature relevant to these research topics.

The next chapter will focus on the first objective of this study, namely the presentation of the findings related to *current L&T practices regarding the development and integration of the self and the professional identity in social work education and training*, according to student social workers and social work educators.

## **CHAPTER 4**

# **FINDINGS: STORYTELLING TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT AND INTEGRATION OF THE SELF AND THE PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY**

### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

This study's first aim was to explore and describe how storytelling can empower student social workers to develop and integrate the self and the professional identity. In order to achieve this aim, the researcher conducted focus group interviews with student social workers and educators to explore and describe current L&T practices regarding the development and integration of the self and the professional identity in social work education and training. In this chapter, the findings emanating from these focus group interviews are presented.

The first section is dedicated to the findings derived from the data collected from the educators. This is followed by the presentation of findings from the focus groups with the student social workers. Each section commences with a biographical description of the participants, followed by the presentation of findings through verbatim quotations from the participants. Additionally, a comparison of these findings with the existing literature, as discussed in Chapter 3, is provided.

### **4.2 FINDINGS OBTAINED FROM EDUCATORS**

Five social work educators participated in the study. Non-probability purposive sampling was used to select participants from the research population of social worker educators at South African universities. The inclusion criteria were full time social worker lecturers at the Department of Social Work at the UWC. Exclusion criteria were lecturers at the Department of Social Work at the UWC who were not employed full time. The recruitment of these participants was discussed in Chapter 2. The table below summarises their biographical profile.

**Table 6: Biographical profile of the social work educator participants**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Years of experience in Higher Education</b>	<b>Highest qualification</b>
1	Female	17	PhD
2	Female	14	MSW
3	Female	20	MSW, currently busy with PhD
4	Female	13	PhD
5	Male	17	MSW, currently busy with PhD

Four female and one male educator took part in this study. This is in line with descriptions by Brown et al. (2016) and Thobela (2018) of social work as a typical female profession. The educator participants have varying years of experience in higher education, ranging from 13 to 20 years. This diverse range of experience enables them to offer a comprehensive understanding of the higher education work environment. Among these participants, two individuals hold a PhD degree as their highest level of education. Additionally, three participants have completed a MSW degree, with two of them currently pursuing PhD studies at the time of the focus group discussions. The educator participants thus possessed educational levels and experience in L&T to make a worthy contribution to this study.

The focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed, and then analysed using the thematic analysis framework as outlined by Maguire and Delahunt (2017) (cf. Clarke & Braun, 2013). Both the researcher and an independent coder conducted the analysis in order to identify the main themes, sub-themes, and categories derived from the data. This assisted the researcher in answering the guiding questions presented to the educator participants.

The table below presents a summary of the findings obtained from the educator participants.

**Table 7: Findings from the social work educator participants**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
Theme 1: Perceptions and experiences regarding the development of the self-vis-à-vis professional practice through L&T practices	Sub-theme 1.1: Descriptions of perceptions of self-vis-à-vis professional practice
	Sub-theme 1.2: The importance of the development and integration of the self and the professional identity
Theme 2: Current activities to stimulate the development and the integration of the self and the professional identity	Sub-theme 2.1: Modules focusing on self-vis-à-vis professional practice
	Sub-theme 2.2: L&T practices that work well
	Sub-theme 2.3: Challenges/limitations experienced
Theme 3: Perceptions of the potential of storytelling as a L&T tool	

#### **4.2.1 Theme 1: Perceptions and Experiences Regarding the Development of the Self Vis-à-vis Professional Practice Through L&T Practices**

As elaborated in Chapter 1, the principles enshrined in the Global Definition of Social Work (IFSW, 2014) necessitate that student social workers be equipped with the skills to continually cultivate the self in relation to professional practice. This preparation is vital to enable them to effectively apply these principles in their future practice. In this theme, the social work educator participants shared their perceptions of the self-vis-à-vis professional practice, elaborating on the importance thereof. These descriptions are presented in the two sub-themes below.

##### ***4.2.1.1 Sub-theme 1.1: Descriptions of perceptions of self-vis-à-vis professional practice***

The participants expressed that the development of the self is a key focus of professional development within the social work curriculum.

*“Development of the self in our profession and in our curriculum is a core element of our students having to really know themselves and their identities. So, it is a key feature that needs to be there” (Participant 3).*

*“I think it [personal development] is necessary for students to be able to build a professional identity. In fact, let me say it is something that should be core to social work” (Participant 4).*

The interconnection between personal and professional identity is also elucidated by Barnard (2015), who aligns with the view that the self functions as an intervention instrument, facilitating social workers in establishing relationships with service users. Barnard advocates for education and training to instil in students an awareness that self-development is an integral facet of continuous learning that enhances the quality of social work practice. Supporting this perspective, Spilková (2018) contends that education and training play a pivotal role in the formation of a student’s ‘professional self’. This process necessitates an awareness and understanding of professional *and* personal values, suppositions, and thoughts. In line with this argument, the participants in this study also noted that the development of the self involves self-awareness concerning the interconnection between personal and professional values and ethics.

*“I’m linking this to things like values and ethics. In developing that identity, you need to understand who you are before you start saying I’m going to be non-judgemental towards clients ...” (Participant 4).*

*“Fostering self-awareness with the students; to articulate themselves. It is so that they are able to understand the self. Because from there we want students to actually think more critically and reflect on their experiences to be able to separate the self from the professional self” (Participant 2).*

In support of the above statements, Dykes and Green (2015) found that social work education and training must aim to draw a link between self-awareness of how one's behaviours are influenced by emotions and how this can impact their social work practices. Participant 5 continued with this train of thought, explaining that self-awareness and a professional identity determines the way in which social workers are experienced by their service users:

*“The self is really imbedded in the professional identity. Because I always remind students that, yes, we equip them with the skills and knowledge, the theories, but ultimately, it’s them as a person that will determine what kind of social worker the world will experience”.*

This statement points to the importance of the development and integration of the self and professional identity, which is further discussed in the next sub-theme.

#### **4.2.1.2 Sub-theme 1.2: The importance of the development and integration of the self and the professional identity**

In accordance with the assertion made by Wu and Pope (2019) that one's own cultural values influence how students engage with diversity, the participants in this study emphasised the need for student social workers to possess skills that enable them to comprehend both themselves and how previous experiences may affect their professional interactions.

*“In order for social workers to be able to assist other people, they need to understand themselves first, and be able to deal with their own issues or whatever has happened in their past so that when they encounter clients, they are able to know how these things affect them” (Participant 4).*

*“Because the danger is that if one doesn’t locate yourself in the profession, you will project (own experiences and perceptions) onto clients. In order for a student to say I’m a professional social worker, they need to say these are the professional ethics and standards. And they will be able to say when I do this, I’m being unprofessional. So, you can’t identify being unprofessional without understanding what it is about you that can cause an ethical dilemma, whether it’s religious background, whatever” (Participant 4).*

As also noted in the sub-theme above, Participant 2 highlighted the importance of self-awareness and the ability to articulate themselves:

*“Students often are challenged to do that [separating personal and professional experiences] because they have a lack of self-awareness, and because of the*

*intrinsic extrinsic factors that sits within how they understand themselves. And then when we're asking them to critically reflect on themselves through our theories of a more African-centred worldview it becomes an even greater challenge to them to articulate themselves".*

The inclusion of the development of skills to support self-awareness within education is supported by Carden et al. (2021) who argue that students need to be skilled in the process of self-evaluation, introspection, and reflection, as well as momentary recognition of how the self may impact clients. Participant 5 underscores how L&T can provide a platform for the development of the self-vis-à-vis professional practice:

*"And that's why for me it's very important that through our activities, through our modules, through our theories that we always remind students ... I like using this analogy that with somebody doing carpentry they've got hammers and nails as their tools. But the best tool for a social worker is their self and how they articulate, how they manage relationships".*

Elaborating on this aspect, the second theme explores current activities that support the development and integration of the self and the professional identity.

#### **4.2.2 Theme 2: Current Activities to Stimulate the Development and the Integration of the Self and the Professional Identity**

*"Whether it is already happening? Yes, I think it does, but it certainly in my experience needs to be developed even further" (Participant 3).*

In line with the above comment by Participant 3, this theme presents the descriptions of modules that include a focus on the self vis-à-vis professional practice, as well as L&T practices that work well and challenges experienced.

#### **4.2.2.1 Sub-theme 2.1: Modules focusing on the self-vis-à-vis professional practice**

The introduction of a focus on self-awareness in a first-year module was identified as a method to establish the foundation for the development of the self in relation to professional practice. This foundational aspect is then further developed and built upon over the subsequent years of study.

*“The Who am I assignment has been part of our curriculum for many years in the first year. So, initially it was in the fieldwork module and then it was moved to the module on fields of social work. But I’ve always felt that it should be located in the module focusing on ethics and processes in social work. Because what the assignment entails is that the student must write about him or herself, their background and so on. And this year took the activity into the ethics module, and linked it with ecological systems theory” (Participant 1).*

*“For example, we start in the first year already and I teach on the foundation level. So there already we start with an assignment called ‘Who am I’. And that assignment features in different forms within different modules [over the course of the study period] and it is really interesting to see how the student develops from foundation level until they graduate. I’ve taken a personal interest in this where I monitor and track them from first year to fourth year to see how they have developed” (Participant 3).*

The participating educators referred to teaching modules at various year levels that incorporate the exploration of the self in relation to professional practice. These modules cover a range of topics, including health and well-being, research, fieldwork, and policy and legislation.

*“On the third-year level, I teach a module called health and wellbeing. What I do right at the beginning of the module is to ask students to describe and define what is health. What is their understanding about health and what is their understanding of wellbeing. And then I also give them a definition and the theory about health and well-being and then they can compare their answers to what I gave them. And then at the fourth year, I teach the research module*

*and one of the things that we focus on is that students need to be reflexive. Being able to locate themselves within that topic. I'm going to use an example, COVID was the last topic we did. Everyone was affected by COVID. So, before we even engaged in the research, we looked at how the topic is affecting them. And then, so that a later stage when we talk about the research process, and first of all they need to understand their own experiences are one thing and that they need to put on a different hat of researcher. So, they need to understand that when you are doing research you are not a social worker, you are a researcher. So, that separation of the different roles. So, imagine now we've been telling them across the year levels that you have your own values and ethics, and you are now coming into the space of being a social worker. Now, this goes further, and you need to go into the space of researcher. So, a part of the module is research ethics and making sure that they understand what it means, and how reflexivity could help them to interpret findings from the perspectives of their participants, and not from their perspectives as individuals or social workers" (Participant 4).*

*"In the fieldwork module on fourth year we do a lot of developmental work within lab sessions. So, developing skills and competencies towards the practice of the individual becoming the practitioner. And with that, it's obviously focussed and linked to supervision. In saying that, so some of the challenges that we have is around the wellbeing of the individual within practice. So, we will bring practitioners that are seasoned practitioners to come to lab sessions, and to provide opportunities for students to engage more critically and reflecting on their own identity through activities. And that helps them because we have topics such as self-mastery, self-regulation, coping mechanisms, and how to deal with personal and professional trauma" (Participant 2).*

*"One of the things that I also emphasise with students in my policy module ... basically your personal experiences are rooted in the political situation and context that they find themselves in. And that they need to see themselves from this vantage point as well. Because it is important for me that students can identify also and not separating self from the issues of the day. And how, as a*

*social worker, would I fit into the bigger picture of inequality, of marginalisation and so on” (Participant 1).*

In addition to specific modules that focus on the development of the self in relation to professional practice, the educators also mentioned various T&L practices. These practices include the use of case studies, photovoice, self-evaluation, and reflections (cf. Carden et al., 2021) as methods to support the development of the self and its integration with professional identity.

*“I think what works well is the case studies from news reports that I use, because it creates ‘aha’ moments in class where they can relate to the topic and can contribute to the discussion in class. So, then I would ask for examples from their communities, and relate it to what I’m talking about in class, and creating and developing that critical thinking about the issues that affects them on a daily basis” (Participant 1).*

*“I’ve used photovoice in a first-year module that focuses on an introduction to social work. And then for my fourth-year students in the module for social work supervision and management we looked at how you can embrace or incorporate the strength-based approach in your role as a supervisor or manager. So, the students had to do a self-administered questionnaire to assess their readiness or openness to embrace the strength-based approach in the future role of being a supervisor or manager” (Participant 5).*

*“From theory goes practice and, and so on and so on. So, predominantly throughout my modules my philosophy would be authentic learning. So, I do incorporate theory into my activities in class and in my assignments. I had an assignment where students also had to look at social issues within their community, take pictures and then reflect on it. So, from their own authentic experiences, knowledge, and perceptions, the first years are expected to integrate that within their assignments. Then, for the fourth years ... narrative therapy focuses on the clients’ narratives but then I also say to them of course one cannot always be objective We are subjective within our own perceptions and experiences, and relating to our clients we have transference issues. So,*

*on that level I engage them in the assignments in relation to narrative therapy, motivational interviewing and solution focussed therapy through reflective activities” (Participant 3).*

The discussion presented in this sub-theme was expanded on by an exploration of what works well, and what challenges are experienced.

#### **4.2.2.2 Sub-theme 2.2: L&T practices that work well**

The discussion in this sub-theme was further elaborated upon through an exploration of what aspects work effectively and what challenges are encountered in these T&L practices.

*“The photovoice activity was very informative. I really was intrigued by the thinking the students used to select a particular picture to represent the first-year experience of being a student at the university. So, they basically had to go around to different spaces on the university to document these personal experiences. So interesting for me was that quite a number of the students took pictures of our computer labs or a computer, because for them, prior to come to university, they had very limited experience of using computers, so that really shocked me. Because the normal assumption is that all young people entering our university are tech savvy, while this exercise actually proved the opposite” (Participant 5).*

*“So, what the assignment [‘Who am I’] entails is the student must take a picture or a video of their community or of their family; any picture or video that they are comfortable with, and they give permission for me to assess and have access to the footage. And then they must look at the systems in the ecological systems theory report on these systems from their perspective with the student looking at what are their own values, where do their values come from, who informs their values. So, it’s an issue of the student moving from the known to the unknown where we deal with social work values and ethics. And they did brilliantly because they had to locate themselves within this ecology and in the community of origin so that I also have a good understanding of who the student*

*is that is in my classroom. That also helped me as a lecturer to understand and to also use examples in class that students can relate with” (Participant 1).*

Both of these statements underscore the importance of educators being aware of their students’ lived experiences and creating an inclusive environment where students feel comfortable expressing their own realities. This aligns with the concept of student-centred L&T, where students are encouraged to explore their self-understanding and its connection to their professional identities (Bayram-Jacobs & Hayirsever, 2016).

Participant 3 also mentioned that reflective activities can provide valuable support for self-development in the context of professional practice. Furthermore, Participant 1 explained how L&T settings can offer students exposure to diverse contexts, allowing them to reflect on these experiences as part of their growth process:

*“What works well is being authentic and sharing their experiences through reflexive and reflective activities and assignments. They are developing a critical understanding of themselves and then also of their communities in which they live in relation to their own ethics and values” (Participant 3).*

*“Students will normally sit with people that are the same like them; like ethnicity and language in particular. So, another thing that I do in all year levels, in the first lecture I would split them all up into diverse groups. And they do not like it at all, because they are in a comfort zone. And I do say to them don’t stress, you will see how this will help you in the long run. And it will help you, it will force you to speak English in class. Because for most of our students English is not their first language and this can be overwhelming for them to express themselves. So, what I do is to say to students that if you cannot express yourself in English, you say what you want to say in your home language and one of us will interpret for the class to understand. That is just some of the ways that I ensure that students stay true to themselves but that they’re also open to difference and diversity and that they are open to be confronted about what shapes them as students, and why. And what about the person that is different to me, or that I do not like? And why do I not like this?” (Participant 1).*

Another aspect that was accentuated by the participants was the value of building on L&T across the year levels:

*“What I like about our modules is the scaffolding. All the modules across the year levels are linked. So, we try to make students understand that there is a link. If I in one module say this is what diversity is, I would link to what other people in, for example, the first-year social work modules are saying about the importance of embracing diversity, or the importance of understanding who you are before you can understand social work values and ethics” (Participant 4).*

Taber (2018) discusses scaffolding as a L&T approach designed to target specific learning objectives. It involves educators starting at the point where students currently are in terms of their knowledge and skills and then progressively guiding them to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to achieve the learning objective. Scaffolding can lead educators to take on more of a facilitative role, as students gradually internalise and integrate the required knowledge and skills into their learning experiences.

#### **4.2.2.3 Sub-theme 2.3: Challenges/limitations experienced**

Webb (2015) emphasises that the formation of professional identity is influenced by how student social workers perceive themselves through a professional self-concept. This self-concept is shaped by personal attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences related to the self. The development of the self and the distinction between personal and professional identity formation can be challenging for students, as it involves navigating the complexities of integrating personal aspects with the professional role and identity:

*“In my experience, I would say it (personal experiences) is not a very easy thing to introduce to students. Especially at first year because they come from different backgrounds. They have different experiences and coming into an academic space is something completely new. So, it becomes, in my experience, difficult for students to understand that they have to separate themselves as an individual from the process of social work. That was my experience having taught the first-year fieldwork module a few years ago. One*

*of the activities was based on ethics and diversity. So, they struggled with that, because they would want to say, no this is how things need to be done” (Participant 4).*

Recognising the difficulties associated with personal and professional identity formation, Holter (2018) emphasises the importance of including both aspects in learning and teaching practices. Additionally, the participants identified various challenges that can affect the development of self in relation to professional practice. The challenges highlighted by the participants encompass language barriers, students not initially choosing social work as their preferred field of study, and a lack of attention to personal trauma that can have an impact on their professional development and engagement with practice.

*“Mostly I feel there is a language barrier rather than a conceptual barrier. Umm and I mean this is now just, just my desk top experience” (Participant 3).*

*“I think a lot of what we have seen over the last couple of years, has been that there are students that did not come into social work as their first choice, and where it is that those students are not as invested in these processes of the development because they have not engaged with the degree from a point of it being this is what they want to study. We are then challenged with that part of the self that the self is more engaged with this as an opportunity for employment, and not really towards it being that this is part of my professional identity” (Participant 2).*

*“A module that I teach on the fourth year is advanced policy and one would think that there’s not really room for students to deal with self and identity in the module, but there is absolutely very much room for that. So, one of the assignments that I have with them is on the topic of socio-political issues in the South African context. I call it state of the nation and they have to look at a form of oppression, marginalisation and inequality, and then they have to explain the phenomena from a feminist perspective. Then they had to link it with the SDGs [Sustainable Development Goals], and then they have to link to the National Development Plan. And then they must make recommendations from a*

*developmental perspective. But what I found is that some were almost 'divorced' from the issues they presented; it was something in the community context, but they were almost removed from the issues that affected them directly" (Participant 1).*

*"I agree [with participant 1], and another challenge would be that they have a lack of awareness towards their own personal trauma and issues as well. So, if it is that they cannot acknowledge through self-awareness of who they are, and of what their personal traumas are, I can understand why it is that from a socio-political aspect they separate themselves from those issues as well" (Participant 2).*

The final theme presents the participating educators' perceptions of storytelling as a potential L&T tool.

#### **4.2.3 Theme 3: Perceptions of the Potential of Storytelling as a L&T Tool**

This study was framed in AI, which introduced storytelling as a L&T tool to facilitate the development of the self in relation to professional practice (cf. Ogude et al., 2019). The participating educators recognised the importance of providing students with the opportunity to share their stories and reflect on how these narratives connect with their future professional practice. The participating educators acknowledged that storytelling could help students become aware of their unresolved issues and the need for personal healing. This self-awareness, facilitated through storytelling, was seen as a way for students to address their own challenges and better prepare themselves for their future practice. Participant 4's statement suggests that storytelling as a L&T tool can empower students in a tangible way:

*"As X [Participant 5] was speaking I actually came to the realisation that there is so much power in letting students tell their story. I realise we need to do this more because we're actually empowering the students instead of making the mistake of just wanting to teach; and this is how things should be and this is it. So, I think there is a value in storytelling because if students are able to reflect from their background, where they come from, their experiences, I think it will make the learning process better. It creates, although we have challenges that*

*we identified, I think storytelling can assist with what X [Participant 1] mentioned, can make that link between what happens in communities also happens to them; it is not different from their own experiences. So, I think there is value in storytelling, because they reflect on what is happening in their lives and how this is also happening in the world out there. Because when people start with understanding their professional role while reflecting on their own lives, they can better deal with the matter of transference” (Participant 4).*

In support of the perceptions shared by Participant 4, Törrönen et al. (2013) assert that empowerment, when utilised as a L&T tool, gives students a better chance of being heard, assists in the exploration of the meaning of previous and present experiences, helps them gain better control of their lives, and enables them to develop and express their professional identities. The value of allowing students to articulate their stories to contribute to their need for healing from their own unresolved problems was also acknowledged by the participating educators.

*“I also believe that there’s value in this. I saw what you [the researcher] did with storytelling last year with the fourth-year students [as a guest lecturer], and so I just want to say plain and simply that I do see the value of it, especially in the fieldwork modules” (Participant 2).*

*“It is so important for students to tell their experiences via stories. In my experience, students in the first year already show loads of unresolved problems and for various reasons they haven’t had the opportunity to share and to heal. We cannot all afford psychologists, so students sit with lots of unresolved trauma and recurring trauma evident in the way they solve problems and the way they behave in and outside class” (Participant 3).*

One participant highlighted the importance of discussing students' communities of origin as a way to support L&T and the development of the self in relation to professional practice.

*“I just maybe want to add that many years ago, when X [Participant 5] and I were studying social work, we used to have an assignment to do a community*

*profile. The value of that task for me as a student at the time was that I had to do this profile of my own community and then look at the assets and what is not in the community. So, things like this I would like to bring back into our curriculum. It could also be like a digital story that you're telling about your community and then understanding yourself as a resident, as someone originating from that community. What shapes that community and what is the influence the community has on me as a student social worker, as a person on my family" (Participant 1).*

In conclusion, Participant 5 indicated a need to further explore how storytelling could be incorporated in L&T:

*"Yes, I would also definitely agree with the power of storytelling, and I would like to really exploit it more often in the different modules I teach because I think it's important that students use different mediums in order to express their voices" (Participant 5).*

The next section delves deeper into how storytelling can empower student social workers in developing and integrating their sense of self and professional identity, as seen from the perspectives of the students themselves.

#### **4.3 FINDINGS OBTAINED FROM STUDENT SOCIAL WORKERS**

Non-probability purposive sampling was used to select participants from the research population of student social workers at South African universities. The inclusion criteria were registered fourth-year student social workers at the Department of Social Work at the UWC. Exclusion criteria were student social workers at the Department of Social Work at the UWC who were not in their fourth year of study. The recruitment of these participants was discussed in Chapter 2. Ten students volunteered to participate in the study. The table below summarises their biographical profile.

**Table 8: Biographical profile of the student social worker participants**

Participant	Gender	Age	Ethnic group
1	Female	22	White
2	Female	24	Coloured
3	Male	31	Coloured
4	Female	22	Black
5	Female	22	Black
6	Female	23	Coloured
7	Female	29	Black
8	Male	27	Black
9	Female	28	Coloured
10	Female	22	Coloured

The participants' ages fall within the range of 22 to 31 years. According to the National Youth Policy (RSA, 2020), which defines youth as individuals between the ages of 14 and 35, all of the participating students can be considered to be in the youth developmental stage.

Relevant to the focus of this study, and in terms of Erikson's (1950) psychosocial development theory and Marcia's (1980) identity status model, Crocetti (2017) refers to identity formation during youth as a repetitive process. Within this process, youths are influenced by a variety of physiological, cognitive, and social changes that result in them reflecting on themselves and the people they want to become in an effort to find their place in society.

Crocetti (2017) explains that there is an interplay between the presence or absence of exploration and commitment, consisting of four statuses: 1) the *achievement status*, where youths commit themselves to something after a period of active exploration; 2) the *foreclosure status*, where youths make commitments without prior exploration leading to their commitment; 3) the *moratorium status*, where youths are actively exploring various alternatives and options and have not yet made any firm commitments; and 4) the *diffusion status*, where youth have neither engaged in explorations nor made any commitments.

In light of this description, it is reasonable to perceive the participating students as being in the achievement status. They have actively engaged with their studies over a three-year period and have made a commitment to continue with their studies in social work during the fourth year. Furthermore, the process of identity formation is

further influenced by cultural aspects, including beliefs, practices, and a sense of belonging to a specific group (Chen, 2014).

Five Coloured, one White, and four Black African students participated in this study. In the context of this research, the ethnic group distribution to some extent mirrors the demographics of the Western Cape, where, according to Statistics South Africa (StatsSA) (2016), 47.5% of the population was Coloured, 35.7% was Black African, 16% was White, and 0.8% was Indian in 2016. It is noteworthy that the participants in this study constituted a diverse group that authentically reflected the composition of society.

Most of the participants were female, with only two male participating students. This is in line with various authors perceiving social work as a typical female profession. Brown et al. (2016) affirm that social work as an occupation is more strongly associated with women than men. These authors also posit that this perception has significant implications for the expectations surrounding gender roles within the profession. Additionally, it was evident that gender stereotypes and cultural beliefs played a significant role in the stigmatisation of the sexuality of male social workers in a predominantly female-dominated profession (Thobela, 2018). These factors all influence male social workers' experiences of the services they render (Brown et al., 2016; Thobela, 2018).

Two focus group discussions took place so that the groups consisted of five participants each. Guest et al. (2016) suggest that the amount of focus groups to ensure a full exploration of the research topic is dependent on aspects such as the purpose of the study, the complexity of questions and the interview guide, the inclusion criteria, and the method of data analysis. These authors found that two focus groups in a non-probability sample, and where semi-structured questions are used, could result in thick data.

In this study, voluntary participation played a role in the final selection of the 10 participants. The participants had access to the interview guide, and the data were analysed using thematic analysis (cf. Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Two main themes with related sub-themes and categories emerged from the data analysis. These are summarised below.

**Table 9: Findings from student social worker participants**

Themes	Sub-themes	Categories
Theme 1: L&T practices that include a focus on the development of the self	Sub-theme 1.1: Modules where the development of the self was included	
	Sub-theme 1.2: Descriptions of the value of the inclusion of the development of the self in L&T practices	Category 1.2.1: Self-awareness
		Category 1.2.2: Differentiation between the personal and professional self
	Category 1.2.3: Self-confidence	
	Sub-theme 1.3: Challenges/limitations regarding the development of the self within the curriculum	
Theme 2: Potential value of storytelling as a L&T tool	Sub-theme 2.1: Supporting self-awareness	
	Sub-theme 2.2: Empowering potential	
	Sub-theme 2.3: Professional development	

Similar to the presentation of the findings obtained from the social work educators, the discussion that follows presents the findings through verbatim quotes from the participating student social workers. These quotes are juxtaposed with relevant literature to provide a comprehensive examination of the research outcomes.

#### **4.3.1 Theme 1: L&T Practices That Include a Focus on the Development of the Self**

The participants were requested to reflect on L&T practices that they have been exposed to over the previous three years of their studies that incorporated the development of the self through a focus on personal and professional identity

formations. They identified modules where this focus was included and also described the value of the inclusion of the development of self in L&T practices. Furthermore, they also shared insights into challenges or limitations they had experienced.

#### **4.3.1.1 Sub-theme 1.1: Modules where the development of the self was included**

A participant noted that the incorporation of the self in the curriculum only took place within the BSW programme, and not in the service level modules.

*“It [service levels modules] has always been about theory and models. Even the majority of the theory most times do not reflect our context. There are times when some lecturers are able to bring it home for me to feel recognised as a person. What always worked best in this regard has always been in the BSW”* (Participant 5).

The BSW programme consists of BSW modules, as well as service levels modules such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, and welfare law offered by different departments and/or faculties at the UWC (UWC, 2023).

Students referred to a “Who am I” activity that was introduced in the first-year module: Introduction to the Field of Social Work. Throughout the four-year programme, educators refer back to this activity so that students can continue reflecting on their development.

*“It shaped me as a student of being aware of certain values I never knew I highly value. I further developed self-esteem by embracing my differences to the context [referring to the L&T context] provided in all the four years of the degree”* (Participant 3).

*“When they introduced the sense of self, it allowed us to be able to reflect and distinguish between the professional and personal self”* (Participant 7).

Also referring to students engaging with the question of “Who am I?”, Simon and Trötschel (2008) argue that students are supported in the development of the self through a process of self-understanding, stemming from the interaction between the person and their social environment, in this case the study programme and discipline.

The above utterances point to a focus on values, and an introduction that included reflection opportunities. This is in line with the Norms and Standards of the BSW (SACSSP, 2020) that require a focus on the support and development of reflective thinking within the curriculum. Another participant specifically referred to modules that focus on social work values and ethics in the first, second, and third years of studies where the values related to professional development also impacted the personal development.

*“The curriculum made me aware of social work values. However, I have my own values, but I have learned about professional values, and this help me a lot as a human being” (Participant 2).*

Related to the above statement, the next sub-theme focuses on the participating student social workers’ description of the value of the inclusion of a focus on the self within the curriculum.

#### **4.3.1.2 Sub-theme 1.2: Descriptions of the value of the inclusion of the development of the self in L&T practices**

In this sub-theme, the participants described the value of the inclusion of L&T activities that support the development of the self in terms of an opportunity that gives recognition to them as individuals:

*“What worked for me was allowing us the opportunity to reflect on our sense of self within assignments” (Participant 8).*

*“Lecturers, and the curriculum sometimes recognise us as humans by relating to us” (Participant 1).*

*“I have recognised myself as a person” (Participant 2).*

Törrönen et al. (2013) confirm that development of the self in L&T practice gives student social workers a better chance of being heard, and therefore being recognised. The participating students further elaborated on the benefits of incorporating self-development into L&T practices. They highlighted advantages such

as enhanced self-awareness, a clearer differentiation between their personal and professional self, and increased self-confidence. These advantages are expounded upon in the subsequent categories.

#### *Category 1.2.1: Self-awareness*

The participants explained how the inclusion of a focus on the development of the self creates a space for self-awareness and reflection (cf. Simon & Trötschel, 2008), which assists them to identify and work through issues that affect their development.

*“The content that is done in the curriculum makes me practice self-awareness. It allowed me to do introspection on my own issues and difficulties”* (Participant 1).

*“It has helped me indirectly with confronting my past traumas and how they impact my everyday life. I am now able to look at my actions and be able to pinpoint where I can change and grow”* (Participant 4).

*“I became aware of how the self is not separate from the social work profession. However, there has to be a balance between the personal and professional self so that values and principles cannot be conflicted”* (Participant 6).

The above descriptions highlight that the focus on the self in L&T practices can lead to further personal and professional development. The latter statement further underscores the necessity for L&T to include content on how to identify and deal with a conflict between personal and professional values. Oyserman et al. (2012) contend that the self-perception of a social worker or student social worker is shaped by both personal and professional experiences, and subsequently, this self-perception can significantly impact their professional behaviour and actions. In line with the discussion of the relevance of the development of the self within the social work profession, Carden et al. (2021) describe the purpose of self-awareness as understanding the self, and understanding how the self can impact others.

In line with the latter statement by Participant 6 above, the participants emphasised how such L&T activities contribute to a differentiation between the personal and professional self.

### *Category 1.2.2: Differentiation between the personal and professional self*

Linking awareness through reflections, a participant described how this contributed to the ability to distinguish between the personal and professional self.

*“During my studies, I was given an opportunity to learn about reflecting and being able to separate my personal and professional values and I have learned through this my sense of self in terms of separating these values” (Participant 10).*

In this category, and in line with previous statements, the participants explained how they can, through L&T activities that focus on reflective thinking regarding the self, become aware how their personal values and experiences may impact on their professional actions (cf. Oyserman et al., 2012).

*“What worked for me when introducing the self, was the fact that it allowed me to separate and differentiate my professional and personal self. I was able to recognise me as a human being, not only a service provider. It allowed me to be self-aware of my own personal values, issues and beliefs, and how it impacts or enhances my ability to practice professionally” (Participant 1).*

Other comments pointed to how the awareness described above, supported them during fieldwork placements to differentiate between the personal and professional self.

*“When I was working with clients, I was able to make use of my professional values and not my own personal values. I was brought up in a house with a single mother, and I will have a non-judgemental attitude if I encounter with single mothers as clients” (Participant 2).*

*“I was able to differentiate between the professional self and personal self. Therefore, it worked that I was able to be professional and apply the code of conduct while working with clients or patients and exclude any personal self” (Participant 3).*

These descriptions align with the SACSSP's (2012) Policy Guidelines for Course of Conduct, Code of Ethics and the Rules for Social Workers, which specifically refer to "impairment" (p. 24) in situations where personal aspects affect service delivery. According to these guidelines, social workers are expected to recognize signs indicating that personal issues may interfere with their professional services and take steps to address these issues to prevent any impairment of their professional performance. One participant highlighted this by sharing her realisation of an area she needs to address further and explained the potential benefits of continued focus on this aspect in her future practice.

*"What has not worked is finding the balance of both when working with clients with similar backgrounds and having the wisdom to know when to incorporate both (personal and professional identity) in order to reach a conclusion that is fitting for my client. Also, being able to pinpoint where your [interpretation of] personal self went wrong from your past and not imposing that"* (Participant 4).

Drawing a link between the personal and professional self, Webb (2015) asserts that a professional identity is based on how social workers think of themselves as a social worker, and that this will be based on a professional self-concept. Therefore, the professional self-concept is informed by attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences linked to the self. In alignment with this description, Spilková (2018) maintains that the development of a student's professional self necessitates a keen awareness and comprehension of their professional and personal values, suppositions, thoughts, and other relevant factors.

The findings indicate that self-awareness, and the ability to differentiate between the personal and professional self, provided the participants with self-confidence.

### *Category 1.2.3: Self-confidence*

One participant noted that the development of self-confidence as a component of their professional identity development has also positively influenced their confidence on a personal level.

*“I have built up confidence as a professional. I am more vocal about advocacy in both my professional and personal life” (Participant 1).*

Another comment underscored how the participating student had acquired the ability to establish and maintain boundaries, a skill that was fostered through the development of self-confidence.

*“I have learnt how to set boundaries and to become more outspoken and stand up for my human rights. So, for sure it has brought up my sense of self toward professional identity” (Participant 2).*

Empowerment through educational practices (UN, 2012) has the potential to instil lifelong learning in students. This process equips them to take a stance towards themselves on the one hand, and comprehend societal issues related to the profession and their place in the profession on the other hand (UWC, 2016). To establish a constructive link between one's self and professional behaviour, Rasheed et al. (2019) and Eckroth-Bucher (2010) suggest that the capacity for objective self-reflection on factors that impact the self can serve as a guiding mechanism. This reflection can influence behaviour, such as the establishment of boundaries, and facilitate the deliberate and authentic development of a professional identity.

Contrary to the advantages described above, the participants also alluded to challenges or limitations that they have experienced.

#### **4.3.1.3 Sub-theme 1.3: Challenges/limitations regarding the development of the self within the curriculum**

Certain participants highlighted a conflict between their personal and professional self, describing a scenario in which the emphasis was placed on their professional identity to the detriment of their personal identity. This imbalance resulted in a challenge to differentiate between the two aspects of their identity.

*“Sometimes your personal and professional values are in conflict which means you are not able to show the real self and who you truly are because of these personal and professional values that might or are in conflict” (Participant 10).*

*“I feel that the I was not true to myself in many instances because I had to adapt to distinguishing between personal and professional self. Always being aware of professional self” (Participant 6).*

The above statements point to a result of not acknowledging the personal identity, and this could result in not addressing those issues that might impair professional behaviour (cf. SACSSP, 2012). Expanding on not openly acknowledging the personal identity, other participants mentioned the fact that the “who am I” activity served as an assessment activity, which influenced their engagement with the activity.

*“I feel that the assignment ‘who am I’ was given to us with the purpose to become self-aware of who we are personally and professionally. But I was marked down, and my narrative [recognition of personal experiences] was not acknowledged” (Participant 6).*

*“What did not work was the fact that they [educators] put a mark allocation to it [‘who am I’ activity], resulting in us reflecting for marks and it may have caused that we don’t reflect as honest because we reflect in a manner that ensures we get the best marks” (Participant 7).*

These statements illuminate that, when their personal experiences and values are being assessed, it could lead to students’ not being open and truthful for fear of receiving a poor mark. This, then, could lead to an inability to identify and address those personal issues that impact negatively on professional services (cf. SACSSP, 2012). While self-awareness is widely recognised as a pivotal component in the formation of a professional identity, it’s worth noting that there is a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding how to effectively integrate self-awareness into L&T practices (Feize & Faver, 2018). Existing theoretical models exist for promoting self-awareness, yet the practical implementation in L&T remains relatively unexplored. This indicates an area that could benefit from further research and exploration.

Participants who found the activity to be a positive experience, as discussed in the previous sub-theme, also mentioned that initially, it was challenging to recognise and address their personal issues when the activity was first introduced. One

participant detailed their initial struggles with acknowledging areas requiring personal development, while another participant highlighted the initial challenge of embracing the value of differentiating between the personal and professional self, as discussed in Category 1.2.2.

*“What did not work for me when the self was introduced, was admitting that I had some developments to do. I refused to believe that I had to heal my personal self first. However, as my years of studies continued, I had realised how necessary it is to be a healed personal self to help clients heal and provide them with my best personal self”* (Participant 1).

*“I experienced challenges in the introduction of the sense of self by finding the balance between the two [personal and professional self]. I evaluated and got to reflect on my background that I always was in denial about”* (Participant 3).

The preceding statements suggest that, despite initial challenges during the introduction of the 'who am I' activity, participants were able to derive benefits from it as the activity was repeated throughout the years of their study. Feize and Faver (2018) concur that ongoing and repetitive self-reflection will gradually yield insights and foster self-awareness. Similarly, Holter (2018) regards social work education and training as a developmental process during which students gradually and systematically develop and acquire a professional identity. Spilková (2018), in alignment with Holter (2018), asserts that gradual and systematic education and training methods, which guide students through a process of self-awareness, prove to be effective in nurturing the development of a professional identity.

As also mentioned in the latter statement, finding a balance between the personal and professional self, and how it may impact on relationships with clients has been identified as a challenge by other participants.

*“What has not work[ed] was finding the balance between the personal and professional self, and being able to use that when assessing or providing interventions when clients have a similar background”* (Participant 1).

*“What has not work[ed] for me was that I was not able to set boundaries. I was not able to find [a] balance because if I see a divorced couple, it will remind me about my own childhood – which means it can be a trigger” (Participant 2).*

The participants consistently noted that when reflecting on the challenges they faced, lecturers often did not take their contextual realities into account.

*“I don’t, however, feel like my sense of self is recognised by the lecturers because they sometimes have unrealistic expectations when it comes to submissions and when we present the problems we have, we are expected to react or think how they think and react to the situations we are dealt with. As a student, my way of handling situations will not be the same as a lecturer who has more than a decade of experience being a social worker or lecturer” (Participant 4).*

*“The course content covered throughout the years is mainly based on professional growth and development which in many instances cause conflict. I do not feel recognised as a human being because the standards of the course content neglects inclusivity of background and acknowledging the elements such as emotional strain and psychological strain” (Participant 6).*

*“I feel as though I haven’t been recognised as a human being. More empathy is needed from lecturers as well as more effort to familiarise themselves with their students” (Participant 8).*

*“I am reminded of the gap between the curriculum and my context. I see myself practice in my own context” (Participant 9).*

*“Some of us, including myself, are still in conflict with who they are and who the lecturers want us to be” (Participant 10).*

Some of the statements point to students’ expectations that their personal circumstances must be taken into consideration regarding workloads, while other statements indicate that diverse contexts must be acknowledged during L&T practices

(cf. Dykes & Green, 2015). However, the SACSSP (2012) asserts that while personal challenges must be acknowledged, social workers must have the capacity to address these challenges. Spilková (2018) notes that an awareness and understanding of professional *and* personal values, suppositions, and thoughts can support students to learn how to deal with personal challenges or conflicts between personal and professional identities. Zimmermann (2015) adds that the ability to interpret experiences can lead to a greater awareness, while Van der Westhuizen et al. (2018) advise that the ability and opportunity to express convert experiences into meaning. This, then, leads to the question of whether storytelling could be viewed as a form of expression to assist students to find a balance between personal and professional identities. Following the exploration of current L&T practices that are included to support the development of personal and professional identities, the participants were asked what their perceived understanding is of storytelling as a L&T tool to be included.

#### **4.3.2 Theme 2: Potential Value of Storytelling as a L&T Tool**

Prior to engaging in a storytelling activity, the participants were asked if they think that storytelling could be a valuable L&T tool to support the development of a personal and professional identity. When asked to elaborate on what storytelling is about, one participant described it as follows: “*Storytelling is life-reading in a way. It opens up one’s imagination*” (Participant 5). Linking the descriptions of limitations in Sub-theme 1.3 to the potential value of storytelling, another participant referred to storytelling as a L&T tool that can assist educators to understand the students’ context better, using the COVID-19 pandemic as an example.

*“They [lecturers] might understand what effects COVID-19 has caused to our psychological, physical, and spiritual well-being”* (Participant 3).

The participants continued to describe the potential value of storytelling in terms of 1) supporting self-awareness, 2) empowering potential, and 3) professional development.

#### **4.3.2.1 Sub-theme 2.1: Supporting self-awareness**

The participants expressed that storytelling can facilitate self-awareness and the identification of vulnerable aspects that might influence their professional performance (cf. SACSSP, 2012). Moreover, they acknowledge that listening to others' stories can promote self-awareness and encourage reflections on how their own experiences relate to those shared by others. This process can also offer alternative options:

*"I think storytelling helps with your sense of self because it helps you to bring out your truth and I think that it is important because sometimes we are not aware of things or traumas of our past that forms part of our truth that has an impact on how aware we are of ourselves. Therefore, with storytelling you are able to share your truth"* (Participant 7).

*"Storytelling can help to become aware of who you are through the lived experience of other people. I am of the opinion that people have a lot in common, but how each individual carries themselves or personal values and principles makes us different. However, stories can make one reflect about who you are, who you want to be and who you don't want to be. Stories therefore contribute to change, growth and development, and constantly becoming aware of who you are and taking ownership of your true self"* (Participant 6).

*"Being able to externalise your own personal story and being able to actually hear your story allows one to reflect back and analyse your own situation. As well as being able to analyse how the audience reacts to your story, this provides an individual with self-awareness and a better understanding of themselves"* (Participant 8).

*"I think it [storytelling] will benefit towards a sense of self because if you are able to tell your story without holding back and being able to reflect on your story it will allow you to acknowledge your sense of self. It will also give you an opportunity to be honest with yourself which will help towards your growth and development"* (Participant 10).

These statements emphasise storytelling as a means to make sense of one's own situation through interpretation. In this regard, George (2021) notes that interpretation is a key characteristic of a hermeneutical approach, where personal experiences are reflected upon and interpreted to foster awareness. Ultimately, this reflective process can shape individuals' self-perception and contribute to both personal and professional development (Oyserman et al., 2012). Van der Westhuizen et al. (2018) agree with this description and add that hermeneutics may be viewed as inherently subjective, acknowledging that previous experiences significantly influence how individuals interpret their current experiences. In alignment with these descriptions, a statement made by one of the participating students underscores how the act of sharing stories can lead to an awareness that may assist with understanding oneself.

*“Students come from different backgrounds but have similar trauma or lived experiences. You become aware of who you are and learning to get to know yourself through other people’s stories” (Participant 6).*

In parallel with Participant 6's perspective on the significance of sharing, Ketelle (2017) elucidates that storytelling serves as a medium for sharing personal experiences. Through this exchange, participants not only gain a deeper understanding of their own experiences by sharing them with others but also acquire insights into others' experiences by actively listening to their stories. Oyserman et al. (2012) draw a link between storytelling and the development of both personal and professional identities. The authors contend that the development of a sense of self has, among others, to do with the ability to reflect on how personal experiences influence the way in which people think about themselves, which in turn influences the development of a professional identity, where awareness, introspection, and reflection (cf. Carden et al., 2021) are required. According to the participating student social workers, the awareness that storytelling can potentially stimulate may contribute to the empowerment of students.

#### **4.3.2.2 Sub-theme 2.2: Empowering potential**

The utterance below points to storytelling as a potential empowerment tool.

*“It [telling your story] also serves as a sense of empowerment for the storyteller that they were able to go through those situations and still be the person they are today” (Participant 4).*

Another participant highlighted the added value of storytelling as a platform where participants can freely share their stories without fear of judgement or criticism.

*“I feel that if I am able to truly tell my story, the honest story of my whole self, I will be more free and show others who I am. Storytelling for me is an awesome way of having someone listen to you, without wanting to change anything or judge” (Participant 9).*

Supporting the above viewpoint, Törrönen et al. (2013) concur that empowerment through L&T practice serves multiple purposes. It provides student social workers with a greater likelihood of being heard, aids them in exploring the meaning of previous and present experiences, helps them gain better control of their lives, and enables them to find ways to develop and express their professional identities.

The next sub-theme links awareness and empowerment with professional development.

#### **4.3.2.3 Sub-theme 2.3: Professional development**

In line with the descriptions of the value of storytelling to become aware of oneself, the participants explained that those areas that have been ignored or neglected can come to the fore through storytelling.

*“Storytelling can help with a person’s self by putting their past to the forefront and being able to dissect the parts that were not clear when that person was going through those instances” (Participant 4).*

*“It [writing and telling your story] will help visit parts or areas of one’s life that do not often get visited by the individual. As one individual share their story, they will get to really understand their inner past, experiences, and current state of being – well-being” (Participant 5).*

The latter statement alludes to the fact that awareness can also support a movement towards well-being due to the acknowledgement of how the past impact the present. In line with the description of a hermeneutical approach above, the participating students also mentioned that a personal narrative can guide students to become aware of those personal issues that need to be addressed in order to engage with the profession:

*“Storytelling helps a personal sense of self because it allows you to construct your own narrative. It structures your own story, to the point in which you may come across information or parts of your story you had not been aware or addressed yet for you to become a professional” (Participant 1).*

*“It [storytelling] guides the person in reflecting into areas that have not been dealt with but have an influence on you as a social work student. It provides the individual the chance to understand what they are going through and being able to relate through the storytelling” (Participant 3).*

Oyserman et al. (2012), in alignment with these statements, underscore that behaviour is shaped by experiences and individuals' self-perceptions within these experiences. Consequently, the self-perception of social workers or student social workers is influenced by their personal and professional experiences, ultimately impacting their professional actions. Furthermore, the potential value of storytelling for professional development was also highlighted in terms of enhancing the ability to relate to clients and effectively utilising storytelling in interventions.

*“Yes, storytelling can develop me as a social worker, because I will be able to relate to my clients by telling stories, and in turn build rapport and gain their trust. In addition, it can develop me as a social worker by constructing*

*narratives when developing interventions that are more effective, as it will be attention grabbing and empowering” (Participant 1).*

*“I think it [storytelling] will help with empowerment of clients and also to build rapport. Furthermore, it would help to build sound relationships and trust” (Participant 2).*

These statements allude to the potential of storytelling as an intervention tool and a way to build trust relationships with clients. Referring to the hermeneutical approach, Van der Westhuizen et al. (2018) assert that through the sharing of experiences, new understanding is not only influenced by the exploration of one’s own experiences, but also by an awareness of the experiences of others. This aligns with the definition of social work, which underscores the profession’s commitment to promoting social change, fostering interpersonal relationships, and empowering individuals (IFSW, 2014). The point made above is further substantiated by a participant who emphasised that a social worker’s personal story can aid clients in exploring their own narratives. However, the participant also noted that this approach necessitates that the social worker first addresses their own personal issues before utilising their story as an intervention tool.

*“I think it [storytelling] would help sharing own experience. However, it is important to first work through your experience before helping others” (Participant 2).*

Spilková (2018) provides support for this viewpoint by stating that an awareness and understanding of personal and professional values and perceptions can lead to a professional self that can respond to the client’s needs.

Similar to the discussion in Category 1.2.2, some participants concurred that storytelling can assist social workers to distinguish between personal and professional identities.

*“I think that storytelling can help you develop as a social worker because it helps me to be honest with myself resulting in me being able to identify my own values and beliefs. And once I am able to do that, I can then easily distinguish*

*between my personal values and beliefs and my professional values and beliefs” (Participant 7).*

*“Storytelling can allow me to be honest with myself. And by being honest with myself I am able to distinguish between my personal self and my professional self. It can also allow me to reflect on my professional self and gain a better understanding of myself as a professional. Where can I do better? What am I doing that I’m happy with? Do I have things to improve on?” (Participant 8).*

A participant linked the professional development with personal development.

*“Storytelling will allow myself to recognise my professional values and adapt it in my personal life” (Participant 10).*

Another potential value was that storytelling, according to the participants, can assist social workers to reflect on their own experiences in practice.

*“It would help with introspect, such as self-monitoring and reflecting on own experience. Yes, I think it can develop me as a social worker. It may help with reflection and to debriefing and to express myself” (Participant 2).*

*“Storytelling can develop me as a social worker by encouraging me to do a self-introspection and to know certain things can be done better next time or what method works better. Then storytelling provides the student with sense of empowerment” (Participant 3).*

The sentiments expressed above can be linked to the reflective learning model described by Davys and Beddoe (2010). This model introduces supervision as a responsive practice for student social workers. Rankine (2017) refers to this model and, in line with the views expressed by the participants above, speaks about reflective supervision where professional development is encouraged through reflections on what happened in practice, what it means, what needs to happen next, and how it could lead to learning. This author further underscores the connection between the personal self and the professional identity, emphasising that both aspects require

attention during supervision. This includes addressing emotions and cultural identity. Similarly, as a concluding point, the participants alluded to the potential value of storytelling within the profession. They highlighted that when social workers share stories from their practical experiences, it can serve as an effective mentoring tool within the field.

*“Yes, because it [storytelling] allows for self-introspection and input from other social workers that would help the social worker to be able to navigate through a situation as the one that was told in the story. It also gives social workers insight on the type of situations that social workers from other sectors/departments are faced with” (Participant 4).*

*“I have learned that by listening to professional social workers telling stories about what they have experienced in the field, I also developed. For instance, working with a difficult client, I became aware of certain elements or aspects to look out for when working with a difficult client. Stories from professional social workers therefore gives a visual presentation of the scope of social work and this contributes to becoming aware of the professional self” (Participant 6).*

#### **4.4 CONCLUSION**

Chapter 4 focused on two key aspects: (i) current L&T practices that have the potential to support the development of personal and professional identity, and (ii) the potential value of storytelling in promoting self-inclusion and reflective L&T practices in the implementation of the BSW programme. The first set of findings that were presented described the perspectives and experiences of social work educators, followed by the perspectives and experiences of student social workers.

Building on the findings described in this chapter, Chapter 5 will present the findings of the experiences of student social workers who participated in a storytelling activity with the aim of encouraging reflection on how personal experiences may impact professional development.

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS: APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AS A FRAMEWORK FOR STORYTELLING IN LEARNING AND TEACHING

#### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

The second aim of this study was to explore and describe how the AI model can be used as a framework for storytelling in L&T activities. In order to achieve this aim, a storytelling activity was conducted with the same student social workers who participated in the focus groups pertaining to the first aim of the study. During this activity, they were given the opportunity to draft their own story according to the four Ds of the AI model, followed by a group discussion.

The connection between storytelling and identity formation is further emphasised by Kim and Li (2020), who discovered that integrating storytelling into the curriculum offers students a platform for self-expression, which can enhance motivation, creativity, identity development, and a sense of connection with others.

This chapter presents the findings obtained from the focus group discussions with the same students who participated in the data collected to address the first aim of the study, which was reported on in Chapter 4.

#### 5.2 FINDINGS

Noted previously, the findings were gathered from the same participants who were engaged in the focus group discussions detailed in Chapter 4. Their biographical information was succinctly summarised in Table 8 of Chapter 4.

As described in-depth in Chapter 2, this activity that informed the discussion on how the AI model can be used as a framework for storytelling in social work L&T consisted of specific phases. After the first focus group, described in Chapter 4, an introduction session was held to describe what will happen during the activity, and the participants were afforded the opportunity to ask questions. The researcher, cognisant of the sensitivity surrounding personal stories, underscored that participants had the option to use stories that were not necessarily their own. Additionally, they were provided with an illustrative story structured according to the four D's of the AI model,

along with key components of storytelling (see description of Aristotle’s elements of a good story in section 3.7.2 in Chapter 3).

The participants were then guided to develop their own stories, focusing on a specific social work principle described in section 3.2.1 in Chapter 3, through the four D’s of the AI model. Once the stories were completed, they shared their stories with the group. Due to the potential sensitive nature of the stories, they were able to choose between two smaller groups where they could share their stories. They chose the same groups as with the first focus group discussions.

After the sharing of their stories, another focus group discussion took place, this time with all 10 participants in one group. They were asked to reflect on their experiences regarding storytelling within the AI framework. The analysis of the data obtained during this discussion emanated in the themes listed below.

**Table 10: Findings from student social worker participants**

Theme	Sub-theme	Categories
Theme 1: The experience of writing own stories	Sub-theme 1.1: Experiencing a sense of empowerment	Category 1.1.1: Awareness of self-help potential
	Sub-theme 1.2: Developing self-awareness	
Theme 2: The experience of sharing own stories	Sub-theme 2.1: Storytelling in a safe environment encourages sharing	
	Sub-theme 2.2: Sharing stories is liberating	Category 2.2.1: Sharing stories is liberating to the self
		Category 2.2.2: Sharing their story is liberating to others
Sub-theme 2.3: Sharing stories enhances listening		
Theme 3: The experiences of using the AI framework	Sub-theme 3.1: Using the 4 D’s of the AI model	Category 3.1.1: Structure and control of the process
		Category 3.1.2: Problem-solving towards different outcomes

		Category 3.1.3: Self-awareness
	Sub-theme 3.2: What worked and what did not work	
Theme 4: Potential integration of personal experiences with professional development		

As with the presentation of the qualitative data presented in Chapter 4, the findings here are conveyed by juxtaposing the participants' verbatim quotations with existing literature. In this representation of the findings reflecting personal experiences, a collective storyline was constructed without attributing utterances to specific participants to support anonymity.

### **5.2.1 Theme 1: The Experience of Writing Own Stories**

The participants were requested to reflect on the opportunity to compile their own stories, whether it was their personal story or not. The main themes emanating from their expressions focused on i) experiencing a sense of empowerment (Sub-theme 1.1), and ii) developing self-awareness (Sub-theme 1.2).

#### **5.2.1.1 Sub-theme 1.1: Experiencing a sense of empowerment**

One of the student participants observed that constructing their stories was an emotional experience as it required revisiting their emotions. They further commented that this process led to gaining new insights.

*"It has been an experience filled with different emotions as I found myself experiencing some of the emotions that come with or are attached to the story. The experience of writing and telling the story gave me some insight that is on a deeper level that I never considered".*

Other participants felt empowered when they noticed how their emotions changed for the better during the construction of their stories:

*“I was a bit anxious at first because of the fear of not providing the proper or sufficient story. As I started writing, I became more at ease and felt confident in elaborating my story according to the different phases”.*

*“At first, I had to decide on what my story will be because I did not want to become vulnerable. But I ensured myself that I had to confront my story and share it. I then chose a story and after choosing the story, it became easy to tell and to share it with the group. I then felt acceptable and at ease knowing I will share my story”.*

Emphasising the importance of sharing stories, Ketelle (2017) aligns with and supports these statements. Ketelle concurs that we make sense of our experiences by sharing them with others and, in the process, also learn about others by actively listening to their stories. Storytelling serves as the catalyst for sharing experiences. The statements above highlight a choice made by participants to share their personal stories, which, on one hand, evoked a feeling of vulnerability and, on the other hand, a sense of empowerment. One participant specifically mentioned feeling empowered, which subsequently bolstered their confidence.

*“I have learned of myself. I became more confident. I feel empowered. I feel I want to empower others”.*

This statement hints at the possibility that the student can envision using this as an empowerment tool in their practice, as also indicated in Chapter 4. This perspective aligns with the views of Wendt and Seymour (2010), who underscore that empowerment involves believing in human potential, which is fostered through education and capacity-building strategies, enabling individuals to realise their full potential and exert control over their own destinies.

Other remarks that suggest experiences of empowerment were also expressed:

*“I could revisit areas in the past. I was anxious but afterwards it was better. I felt in control of it, but also in future ... I am in control of my future”.*

*“It was enlightening to come up with what would work. It gave me choices regarding the options to deal with it”.*

The latter comment refers to the Dream and Design components of the AI model. Within this framework, emphasis is placed on the fact that empowerment during the Dream component results in the ability to plan (i.e., Design) and attain (i.e., Destiny) one’s goal (Cooperrider et al., 2008). Hung et al. (2018) found that the participative nature of AI gives group members a space to be heard, leading to a sense of liberation and empowerment. According to the participants, the sense of empowerment they experienced also heightened their awareness of the self-help potential associated with writing stories. This is further described in the category below.

#### *Category 1.1.1: Awareness of self-help potential*

The participants expressed how the writing of the story created an opportunity to dream about possibilities, thus bringing hope that the writing of stories can lead to finding solutions for a situation.

*“In putting together my story, I learned how important it is to dream about the possibilities of the future and how it can be put into reality by having the necessary resources and support to achieve the dream”.*

*“It allowed me to understand how I discover events and purpose in my life, and how I was able to develop a design or intervention about how I will face or deal with the problem I was facing”.*

Supporting the latter utterance above, McAdams and McLean (2013), referring to narrative inquiry, postulate that the exploration of one’s life story can assist with the integration of the past and present, and assist a person to find a sense of purpose and meaning.

Through constructing their stories, the participating students not only gained an awareness of possibilities, but also became aware of how they can use the stories to address or solve problems. In addition, a participant’s comment pointed to reflective learning (cf. Davys & Beddoe, 2010) as a potential value of constructing stories.

*“Intervention is so solution focussed, but to reflect through storytelling, they [social workers] can apply storytelling to their own situation”.*

According to the above statement, reflections on own experiences through storytelling can lead to a better understanding of the self, and how this influences professional identities and actions (cf. Oyserman, 2012).

The discussion in this sub-theme points to self-awareness as a potential outcome of constructing stories.

#### **5.2.1.2 Sub-theme 1.2: Developing self-awareness**

A participant highlighted that writing the story supported honest and truthful reflections, and that this was a new experience.

*“The experience allowed me to reflect honestly and to write my truth, something I have never done before, and the feeling is really relieving. I have not experienced storytelling like I have over the past few days”.*

Developing self-awareness through storytelling is one of the focus areas of this study, aligning with the aim to explore how storytelling can be used to encourage the development of self and professional identity in social work education and training. This emphasis is reinforced by various guiding documents, including the Global Definition of Social Work (IFSW, 2014), the BSW Standards (CHE, 2015), the Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training (IFSW & IASSW, 2020), and the Norms and Standards for the BSW (SACSSP, 2020). These documents stress the importance of the integration of the self and the professional identity as a part of L&T practices to ensure the effective implementation of the principles of the social work profession. Wu and Pope (2019) advise that the integration of the development of the self and the professional identity can be achieved through a focus on stimulating self-reflection and self-awareness.

The participating students confirmed that reflecting while constructing their stories enabled them to become self-aware.

*“I was thinking and reflecting a lot and did introspection. I have learned from myself, and I felt good when I put my story together. I was not the same person after I have put my story together”.*

*“It allowed me to understand how I discover events and purpose in my life, and how I was able to develop a design or intervention about how I will face or deal with the problem I was facing”.*

These statements allude to personal transformation that took place while the participants were writing their stories. Rasheed et al. (2019) describe the development of the self as a cognitive activity, emphasising that it is a deliberate engagement with one’s own inter-, intrapersonal, and contextual experiences. These activities require that the person reflects on their own characteristics, abilities, perceptions, emotions, motives, and opinions (Simon & Trötschel, 2008).

Being self-aware is connected to the subsequent theme, which is the experience of sharing one's own stories. This correlates with the practical nature of the core components of the hermeneutical loop (Van der Westhuizen et al., 2018.). The hermeneutical loop involves exploring various possibilities, reinforcing the idea that sharing stories can lead to new insights and potentially create more options or possibilities.

## **5.2.2 Theme 2: The Experience of Sharing Own Stories**

The participants were requested to reflect on how they experienced sharing their stories. They referred to three aspects in this regard, namely: i) storytelling in a safe environment encourages sharing (Sub-theme 2.1); ii) sharing stories is liberating (Sub-theme 2.2); and iii) sharing stories enhances listening (Sub-theme 2.3).

### **5.2.2.1 Sub-theme 2.1: Storytelling in a safe environment encourages sharing**

In Sub-theme 1.1, the participating students explained how writing their stories was initially uncomfortable but eventually led to a sense of empowerment. Similarly, although the participants acknowledged their initial discomfort in sharing their stories, they mentioned that the size and attitude of the group with whom they shared their stories instilled the confidence to do so. Additionally, the reminder that the story they

constructed and shared may or may not be their personal story contributed to this newfound confidence.

*“I was anxious because I feared providing a story that might not be linking to any of the other participants. However, the group made me feel comfortable in sharing my experiences, and the group’s body language while I was sharing the story indicated that they were actively listening and that I made sense”.*

*“It felt like I was able to let my guard down, and tell my story without feeling judged because it may or may not have been based on my own life story. The experience was eye opening, knowing that I could take this one story and construct it in my own way”.*

These statements find support in the insights provided by Carden et al. (2021), who elaborated on how the ability to become aware of and reflect on feedback and responses received can aid in understanding how the self affects others and vice versa. Additionally, regarding the group in which stories were shared, a participant noted that although the group shared commonalities, its composition encouraged individualism, as diverse individuals handle similar situations in unique ways.

*“We have a lot in common and we learn from others lived experiences. It is an opportunity to learn how they design their outcome or life”.*

Moreover, the establishment of smaller groups where participants could choose the group in which they wished to share, combined with the group members' lack of knowledge about whether the story was the participant's own or not, created a safe space for vulnerability, as articulated in the following statement:

*“We don’t want to reveal [referring to classroom situations] but now the small group let me be vulnerable. So, I felt strong. We don’t trust [sharing personal information], so whether it is my story or not helped a lot!”*

Dykes and Green (2015) refer to vulnerability when social issues encountered in social work practice might relate to a student social worker’s real-life experiences

that will challenge them to engage with such issues effectively and professionally. This points to a need for an opportunity to reflect, to become aware of own vulnerabilities, and to look for possible solutions to deal with this effectively.

The ability to share within a safe space was also described as a liberating experience, which is further elaborated on in the next sub-theme.

### **5.2.2.2 Sub-theme 2.2: Sharing stories is liberating**

Firstly, the participants elucidated their own sense of liberation during the sharing of their stories. Secondly, they expressed their belief that this act of sharing also liberated the other members of the group with whom the stories were shared. This is in line with Maclean et al.'s (2012) reference to storytelling as a way to make sense of oneself and one's own experiences across time, space, and context. In this way, the construction and telling of the story becomes an experience in itself (cf. De Certeau, 1984).

#### *Category 2.2.1: Sharing stories is liberating to the self*

Participants reported that being afforded the opportunity to share their stories left them feeling liberated and valued as human beings.

*“While I was sharing my story, I was emotional. I felt grateful and I was able to reflect. I felt heard and I felt relieved. I was feeling good, excited for being brave and sharing my own story. I was feeling now that others can learn from my story. I became what I wanted to become. I was brave and realised my human rights is important”.*

*“I felt listened to and also understood. It was the first time I had the opportunity of sharing it with other people or publicly”.*

The utterances above indicate that the participating students opted to tell their own stories, and that this led to a feeling of being heard, of mattering, and of being liberated. From a liberation psychology perspective, Afuape and Hughes (2018) establish a connection between liberating experiences and emotional well-being. These authors observe that liberation is attainable when a person is liberated from constraints on thought and behaviour. In the context of this study, dialogue plays a

role in fostering this sense of freedom. Apart from feeling liberated themselves, some participants stated that sharing their story contributed to the liberation of other participants.

*Category 2.2.2: Sharing their story is liberating to others*

The statements made by the two participants below clearly convey their belief that sharing their stories contributed to other participants feeling liberated and inspired by what they learned from the stories they heard:

*“I felt at ease sharing my story, because I knew that we have lived experiences from other people’s stories told in the group. So, my story possibly could make a difference in someone’s life. I did not feel anxious or nervous. I, however, became aware of the possibility of the impact it will or might have on someone else since we deal with situations differently. I therefore became confident in knowing that sharing my story was not to harm anyone that is listening to it but to reflect on my experiences or my story which in return would allow other people to reflect on their stories as well”.*

*“I did enjoy it because I was able to put my story out there for others to hear and learn how it made them feel and the experiences they had because they put themselves into the story while I was telling it”.*

The experiences shared above indicate how storytelling as a L&T tool can contribute to experiences of liberation through empowerment in educational practices (cf. Hung et al., 2018; UN, 2012). According to the participating student social workers, achieving empowerment through listening to others' stories necessitates active listening, as will be discussed in the following sub-theme.

**5.2.2.3 Sub-theme 2.3: Sharing stories enhances listening**

The participants concluded that sharing stories in a group contributes to the practice of listening to the stories of others:

*“I think when we shared our stories within our groups it helped us as individuals to actively listen to others’ stories”.*

*“Let me say that I have discovered the power of listening without the need to respond”.*

*“I have realised that all I needed was just someone to hear me”.*

*“Having been listened to, made it so much easier to listen to others”.*

Furthermore, the participants pointed out that listening to the stories of others can help individuals become aware of shared experiences despite the diversity within the group. Demonstrating empathy and sensitivity in this context of diversity aligns with the social work principle of respect for diversity and is paramount in the life of a (student) social worker who engages with the profession (cf. DSD, 2013b). In this regard, Turton and Schmid (2020) argue that respect for diversity stems from self-awareness. In L&T, it necessitates students to actively engage and encourages critical reflection on what they are hearing and learning. Dialogue and the ability to share and listen (cf. Afuape & Hughes, 2018) can contribute to an awareness of the self and others (Van der Westhuizen et al., 2015). In reference to becoming aware of both similarities and differences within the group where the stories were shared, the participants highlighted the role of empathy in the context of story-sharing.

*“I showed empathy to the stories that were shared, and I could relate to certain stories. It made me realise that we are individuals from diverse communities and background but share the same social issues”.*

*“While listening to other people’s stories, I realised that we all have so much in common although it is in a different context, but I could relate to many different people”.*

*“Listening to others was such an amazing feeling. I was able to show empathy; to understand or feel what another person experiencing. I was also being aware of being sensitive”.*

*“It was an enlightening experience because you never know what someone might be going through because you are so fixated on what you went through.*

*To know other people's stories has allowed me to grow in the sense that I am more in-tune with the people around me and what they may be going through".*

Cuff et al. (2014) conceptualise the term "empathy" in terms of cognitive and affective factors. Understanding, as a cognitive factor, requires accuracy, which in turn has an influence on emotions and behaviours/responses. Correct understanding, within this description, requires active listening.

The experiences of writing and sharing of stories were framed in the AI framework, which was also the theoretical framework from which this study was conducted. As such, the next theme focuses on the participating students' experiences of using the AI framework.

### **5.2.3 Theme 3: The Experiences of Using the AI Framework**

Before embarking on the process of constructing a story within the framework of the AI model, the participants received theoretical information about the AI model and were presented with an example story created using this model. In this theme, the participants conveyed their experience using the four D's of the AI model (Sub-theme 3.1), as well as what worked and what did not work (Sub-theme 3.2).

#### **5.2.3.1 Sub-theme 3.1: Using the 4 D's of the AI model**

Participants were requested to report on using the four D's of the AI model and how it supported them in developing and sharing their story. They reported on the value of a structured framework, how the development of the story led to problem-solving, and how this contributed to self-awareness.

##### ***Category 3.1.1: Structure and control of the process***

One participant explained that the 4 D's provided structure and went on to mention that a degree of healing occurred during the development of the story.

*"The 4 Ds brought structure and healing to my story. It allowed me to reflect on where I was at and what brought me to that particular point and then allowed me to create a vision, reflect on what needed to change and where I needed support and then brought a reality into perspective, reminding me that the end*

*goal remains my own truth for a destiny that resonates with me. As well as the power to change my narrative at any time; I am in control of creating my life the way I want it”.*

The above statement also points to a sense of empowerment and freedom to make choices (see Sub-theme 1.1) to influence one’s own destiny (cf. Afuape & Hughes, 2018). Similarly, another participant reported that the four D’s of the AI model provided a structure according to which they could construct their story. This structure contributed to them feeling in control of the process and therefore also of their destiny.

*“The four D’s helped me divide my story into sensible parts. I usually tell stories in a way that it is a lot of information told in different parts that sounds like 10 stories in one. However, using the four D’s helped me construct my story, to emphasise, and allow understanding of what is being told”.*

Brailas and Sotiropoulou (2023), in line with the above statement, refer to AI through storytelling as a structure where participants’ interactions are facilitated to create a synergy while also learning to appreciate the advantages of differences. In addition to the structure the framework provided, and the control it afforded the participants, they also explained how it led to problem-solving while constructing their stories within the AI model.

#### *Category 3.1.2: Problem-solving towards different outcomes*

The utterances below point to problem-solving as an outcome of constructing the story within this framework, as well as the realisation of the possibility of different outcomes to problematic situations.

*“The four D’s helped me to develop the story because it forced me to think of the crisis but also solutions and how one has to work towards the solutions. I think it is important because as people we are so focused on the crisis or problem part of our stories that we don’t think about the solutions or how to approach the problem”.*

*“For example, constructing a story that makes you think of a problem, and possible outcomes, and also confronting and outlining the story in such a manner that it becomes a visual representation of who I am and who I can become through my story”.*

*“I was able to recognise or discover the problem of my story which allowed me to dream of the possibilities of the circumstances. By being able to design my dream to reality it made me realise that from now on forward it is critical to apply the 4 D’s in my life because when I wrote my story it made me realise the different realities. So, this will help me in the future when I need to make tough decisions and what the outcomes would be”.*

In their study of using stories as a L&T tool, Arneja and Tyagie (2020) concluded that storytelling contributes to the development of skills such as logical reasoning and problem-solving. The latter statement above further indicates that the framework serves as a possible tool for personal development and the solving of personal problems, as it has to do with becoming aware of one’s experiences *and* opportunities or different options to solve problems. It is in line with the discussion in Category 3.1.1 about AI as a structure to solve both personal and professional problems. The statements above further indicate that the awareness of what one hopes to achieve through the AI module, exploring the problem and finding solutions, results in self-awareness.

### *Category 3.1.3 Self-awareness*

Reflecting on the AI framework, a participant expressed that by comprehending the AI framework, they developed an awareness of how problems had been resolved in the past.

*“I realise that all my life I have always applied the 4 D’s, but I was not aware of it until yesterday”.*

Another participant highlighted that the framework leads to an awareness of not only what is happening at present but also of what could happen to manage the situation.

This statement resonates with the sharing of stories to solve problems, as discussed previously.

*“It allowed me to reflect on where I was at and what brought me to that particular point and then allowed me ... reflect on what is needed to change and where I needed support and then brought a reality into perspective”.*

Awareness that is developed through the process of constructing and telling stories is supported by the interaction between the group members and the opportunity to express and share. Through such interactions, self-awareness can be supported, leading to self-development (Brailas & Sotiropoulou, 2023).

In addition to sharing their experiences regarding the AI framework, the participants also described what worked best for them, and what did not work.

#### **5.2.3.2 Sub-theme 3.2: What worked and what did not work**

In this study, the development of the story, including having time to write and create the story, was mentioned as something that worked well.

*“The part about the flow of the story guided by the four D’s and having to respond on paper first worked for me very well. The process of having to write my thoughts first before verbally sharing assisted me”.*

However, in terms of what did not work well, a participant mentioned that the period was too short and that they would have preferred to engage more with the stories.

*“I would personally love an opportunity to delve deeper into storytelling. These two days were just too quick”.*

The above viewpoint relates well to the hermeneutical loop (cf. Harris, 2015) that is described as a spiral where participants continuously repeat the actions within the loop to create more space for reflections, awareness, and development.

In line with the discussion in Category 3.1.1, where the structure of the AI was viewed as a framework to deal with existing issues or problems, and elaborating on

the value of planning and constructing the story, a participant indicated that it had a therapeutic value.

*“What works best for me was while I was constructing my story it was therapeutic ... just the writing itself”.*

As indicated above, the four D's of the AI model provided the participants with a framework from which to construct the stories that they shared, and it could be used professionally and in their personal lives. A participant referred to the structured nature of the AI framework, mentioning that each phase provided a space to express emotions.

*“I gained knowledge through the explanation of the 4 Ds' phases and being able to express certain feelings during the different questions. Also hearing how other participants structured their stories”.*

The latter part of the statement above indicates that the learning continued when the participants learned how other participants structured their stories, pointing to the three phases in a hermeneutical spiral. These phases focus on repetitive actions where people reflect on themselves, share with others while hearing their stories, and then interpreting and reconstructing what they discovered to develop new insights (cf. Van der Westhuizen et al., 2018).

Other descriptions of the structure of the AI that worked well illuminate that the structure of the 4 D's worked for the participating students. It helped them link their own stories with social work principles, construct stories that allowed time for reflection, making it easier to share the stories. Additionally, it facilitated awareness of their own ways of dealing with situations, highlighting strengths, and provided a space where they could dream.

*“It guided me in being able to elaborate in that particular structure. The 4 D's further helped me in finding the appropriate story that will link to the specific social work principle. I was able to distinguish which part of the story fits in the different phases”.*

*“I think the part of physically putting my story into words and applying the 4 D’s worked because sometimes it is difficult to tell your story to someone. So, when you write it gives you a chance to reflect on the story that was written. However, I must admit that I am not usually comfortable in sharing something of myself. But in this case, I was very comfortable in sharing my story with others”.*

*“The 4 D’s was a great tool. While I followed the steps, it allowed me to realise what happened in the situation. I was able to have a dream. It also made me discover my own process. I have learned from my strengths and successes”.*

The above descriptions reflect the strengths-based nature of AI that aims to develop the potential of participants by 1) exploring mutual strengths, 2) encouraging dialogue, and 3) sharing experiences (Cooperrider et al., 2008).

The way in which the storytelling activity was facilitated was also identified as something that worked well. The participants referred to this activity as a workshop in their narratives below.

*“I loved how the context and content was introduced, then demonstrated before we were expected to construct our own stories. We often take this for granted and assume participants would know. But this workshop showed that when we explain a process and relate it to ourselves, we teach others better. I have in a long time not experienced complete clarity about a process and know exactly what is expected”.*

*“The workshop director [researcher in the facilitating role] was also very helpful and provided us with sufficient information to understand the content and task”.*

*“What worked also was the fact that we were told we do not have to read off our pages on what we wrote when constructing stories. It allowed free flow of storytelling without the pressure of possibly leaving some things out”.*

Regarding the facilitation of the storytelling activity, the participants expressed appreciation for how the activity was introduced and demonstrated to them. They also highlighted the freedom they had to choose whether to read or tell their stories, which

they found effective. Through these descriptions, the participants emphasise the significance of a tangible experience that allowed them to grasp what was expected, followed by actively experimenting with writing and sharing their own stories. This relates to Kolb and Kolb's (2017) description of experiential learning theory, consisting of four actions within a circular process: 1) concrete experience, 2) reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and 4) active experimentation.

The participants referred to the small groups in which they told their stories as another aspect that worked well for them, which also created a safe space to share.

*“What worked best for me was the small group because it created a comfortable space for everyone. We get so used to interacting in large groups that we forgot individualism. The small group therefore promoted individualism which made it comfortable or safe to share my story”.*

*“I felt more comfortable in smaller groups, especially when presenting your own work is required”.*

The group size indicated as working well when small is supported by Flewitt et al. (2016) who advise that storytelling works best through a combination of good instructions and small groups where all participants can receive the opportunity to actively participate.

As a final theme, the participating students described their perceptions on the potential integration of personal experiences with professional development.

#### **5.2.4 Theme 4: Potential Integration of Personal Experiences with Professional Development**

As a conclusion to the storytelling activity, the participants were asked how they envisage storytelling could assist them to implement the social work principle they chose in practice, while also considering their own experiences.

The participating students reflected on three of the four principles of social work they were requested to choose from: respect for diversity, human rights, and collective responsibility. One participant connected human worth and dignity to working with diverse groups and shared what they had learned about this during the storytelling activity.

*“I will respect every human’s worth and dignity. I will further use the respect of diversity principle by understanding that all humans come from different backgrounds. Certain actions could be influenced through cultural factors; hence I will use this principle to have better understanding for the client. Through this principle, I might gain and earn a strong relationship with the client in the field”.*

Intercultural sensitivity consists of open-mindedness and non-judgmental attitudes that enable individuals to develop and display sensitivity towards other cultures, embracing their differences and accepting them. This aligns with the statement by the NLASW (2019), emphasising that the education and training of social workers must encompass knowledge, understanding, and skills to work effectively within the cultural context of clients. The above statement suggests that linking personal stories with a social work principle through a storytelling activity can help students grasp this principle.

The following statements capture how the principle of human rights and the development of an understanding of this principle occurred through storytelling.

*“I chose human rights and when implementing this principle in practice everyone has a voice to their own rights”.*

*“As a social worker, I have to advocate for others, their rights. From my own experience, I have learned that what I went through must not impact my professional values”.*

*“I think drawing from my own experience during this workshop, when I am confronted with a human rights case in practice, the 4 D’s will help me when deciding on how to proceed in helping my client”.*

These participants highlighted the importance of developing an understanding of their clients’ circumstances as a human right, that this human right must not be affected by personal values, and that storytelling could contribute to understanding the client’s situation as a practical way to respect human rights.

The latter statement above, as previously indicated by the participants and discussed in Sub-theme 3.1, points to the potential use of the AI framework in practice. The social work profession recognises that human rights need to coexist alongside collective responsibility for practices that are based on social justice (IFSW, 2014). In terms of collective responsibility, a participant explained that this principle can lead to empowerment.

*“I will be able to empower other people, using storytelling, whilst implementing the principle of collective responsibility”.*

Collective responsibility takes place in social work practices where people are concerned about and take responsibility for each other’s well-being (IFSW, 2014). In this study, the above comment points to the use of storytelling in practice to stimulate collective responsibility.

### **5.3 CONCLUSION**

Chapter 5 presented four themes that emerged from the second focus group with student social workers: their experiences of writing their own stories, the experiences of sharing their own stories, their experiences of using the AI framework, and their perceptions regarding the potential integration of personal experiences with professional development.

Chapter 6, which follows, concludes the thesis by summarising the research methodology and research findings, drawing conclusions, and providing recommendations for social work education and training, as well as suggesting areas for further research on the topic.

## CHAPTER 6

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

The problem statement for this study, as presented in Chapter 1, highlighted a need to explore and describe how the AI model can stimulate reflective thinking through storytelling in order to support the development of the self and the professional identity, and to engage effectively with the principles of the social work profession.

This study was therefore guided by the following research questions:

- How can student social workers be empowered to develop the self and the professional identity through storytelling?
- How can the AI model be used as a framework for storytelling in L&T activities?

The study was subsequently directed by two research aims, namely: to explore and describe 1) how storytelling can empower student social workers to develop and integrate the self and the professional identity, and 2) how the AI model can be used as a framework for storytelling in L&T activities.

In order to achieve these aims, three research objectives were formulated:

- 1) To explore and describe current L&T practices regarding the development and integration of the self and the professional identity in social work education and training through interviews with student social workers and social work educators.
- 2) To explore how storytelling can be used to encourage the development of the self and professional identity in social work education and training through a storytelling activity with student social workers.
- 3) To describe how a storytelling activity can be framed in the AI model to encourage the development and integration of the self and the professional identity in social work education and training.

This chapter will serve as the conclusion of the thesis, providing a summary of the research methodology and research findings, along with drawing conclusions and offering recommendations for social work education and training, as well as suggesting areas for further research on the topic.

## **6.2 SUMMARY**

This section presents a summary of the research methodology and study's findings.

### **6.2.1 Summary of the Research Methodology**

The research paradigm, approach and designs that guided the researcher's choices of research methods are summarised first, followed by the summary of the research methods chosen and used in this study, the ethics, and the limitations of this study.

#### **6.2.1.1 Research paradigm, approach and designs**

The research paradigm, approach, and designs that were employed in this study were used to determine the relevant research methodology. To address the research questions and achieve the study's aims, the researcher worked from the interpretive paradigm. This paradigm allowed for the different perspectives of student social workers and their educators to be included in the interpretation of the research findings. In addition, it acknowledged the value of their subjective experiences and social realities related to the research topic (cf. Kivunja & Kuyin, 2017; Bryman, 2016).

Given the study's focus on exploring the subjective realities of student social workers and their educators, a qualitative research approach was adopted. This approach involved capturing the voices of individuals closely related to the research topic. Therefore, it aligned with the interpretive paradigm, as narratives were used to describe the participants' experiences and perceptions to answer the research questions (cf. Jensen, 2016).

The explorative, descriptive, and contextual designs supported the researcher to identify the relevant methods and techniques to use in this study. The explorative research design was chosen because the researcher wanted to gain a deeper understanding of how storytelling can facilitate the development of the self among student social workers in fostering professional identify formation (cf. Ormston et al., 2014). This design provided the researcher with a framework to choose the method of data collection in support of the first and second research objectives. In order to create an in-depth description of the data, and to enhance the understanding of the research problem, the researcher opted to include the descriptive research design (cf. Ritchie & Ormston, 2014). This research design directed the choice of data analysis that addressed the third research objective of this study. As this study was conducted in

the context of social work education and training, a contextual research design was employed to ensure that the findings are relevant to and interpreted within the context and focus of this study (cf. Ritchie & Ormston, 2014; Ormston et al., 2014). The method and technique to identify the population and sampling were informed by this research design.

#### **6.2.1.2 Research methods, ethics and limitations**

Two research populations were identified as relevant to this study: 1) social work students at South African universities, and 2) social work educators at South African universities. The researcher considered that the probability of being included in the samples from the two populations could not be predetermined. Therefore, the non-probability sampling method was chosen. As specific pre-set criteria were utilised for selecting participants, the purposive sampling technique was used within this sampling method.

The inclusion criteria for the social work educators were as follows: they had to be permanent lecturers in the Department of Social Work at the UWC with more than two years' experience in teaching and learning in the BSW program. The exclusion criteria included lecturers with less than two years' experience and those who were not permanently employed at the university. The years of experience of the five educator participants in this study ranged between 13 and 20 years.

Ten student social workers were selected to participate based on the inclusion criteria of being registered fourth-year students in the Department of Social Work at the UWC. The choice on fourth-year students was influenced by their exposure to education and L&T related to the development of the self and integration of professional identity.

The chosen method of data collection was focus group interviews, guided by semi-structured questions in an interview guide. The method was chosen as focus groups assist and encourage participants to fully explore the topic. The discussions led to participants exploring shared understandings or different viewpoints, and therefore contributed to rich data. The researcher made use of probes to further encourage them to give all the information they deemed relevant to the research topic (cf. Harding, 2019).

Three focus groups were conducted:

- 1) A focus group with lecturers explored their perceptions and experiences regarding modules where the development of the self receives attention, current activities to stimulate the development and the integration of the self and the professional identity, as well as storytelling as a potential L&T tool. They were also asked to report on what works well and what does not work well.
- 2) The first focus group with student participants focused on the sharing of perceptions and experiences regarding current L&T experiences that support the development and the integration of the self and the professional identity. They were further encouraged to reflect on storytelling as a potential learning tool.
- 3) The second focus group with students took place after they had participated in a storytelling activity centred around social work principles. The introduction to this activity and the actual stories shared by the students were not used as part of data collection but served as preparation for the data collection in this final focus group. During this focus group, they explored their experiences with the opportunity to write and share their stories, discussed how the four Ds of the AI model supported them in developing their stories, and reflected on what aspects of the activity worked well and what did not. Additionally, they were asked to elaborate on how they perceived storytelling could assist them in implementing their chosen social work principle in practice, considering their own experiences.

The focus groups were recorded and transcribed together with field notes made by the researcher during the focus group discussions. The main themes, sub-themes and categories emanating from the data were identified by the researcher and an independent coder who conducted a thematic data analysis through the steps proposed by Maguire and Delahunt (2017). This method of data analysis supported the researcher to answer the guiding research questions of this study (cf. Clarke & Braun, 2013).

Given the importance of ensuring the trustworthiness and authenticity of the qualitative data obtained within the interpretive research paradigm, data verification was conducted according to the criteria of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability as recommended by Guba (1981).

Throughout the implementation of the research methods, the researcher considered ethical practice in social research, focusing on: Avoidance of harm and debriefing, voluntary participation and informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and privacy, and data storage and management.

Limitations of this study include the fact that it was conducted at one university and focused on one year-level within the BSW program. Therefore, when interpreting the findings, it is important to consider the contextual nature of this study.

## **6.2.2 Summary of The Findings**

The first part of Chapter 4 addressed how, by means of focus group interviews with the participating educators and students, the development and integration of the self and the professional identity is stimulated in current L&T practices.

### **6.2.2.1 Educators**

**Educators** presented their perceptions according to three themes from which a number of sub-themes evolved.

Firstly, the participating educators presented their perception of the integration of the self-vis-à-vis professional identity. Two sub-themes were identified in this theme. In the first sub-theme, the educator participants asserted that the development of self is a key focus of professional development within the social work curriculum. They also confirmed decryptions in literature, namely that the development of the self has to do with self-awareness regarding the link between personal and professional values and ethics. This is instrumental in the construction of a student's professional self, which requires awareness and understanding of professional *and* personal values, suppositions, and thoughts (Spilková 2018). In this study, the educator participants also noted that self-awareness and a professional identity determine the way in which social workers are experienced by their service users.

The subsequent sub-theme confirmed the importance of the development and integration of the self and the professional identity. It elaborated on how a student's own cultural values impact how they engage with diversity (cf. Wu & Pope, 2019). Educators accentuated that student social workers require skills to understand themselves, and how past experiences may impact their professional engagements. The importance of students being able to articulate themselves was also accentuated. The emphasis was further placed on the importance of L&T to provide a platform for the development of self-vis-à-vis professional practice.

Secondly, current activities that support the development and integration of the self and the professional identity were described. The participating educators

presented modules focusing on self-vis-à-vis professional practice, L&T practices that work well, and the challenges/limitations they experience. They referred to specific modules in different year levels where the self in relation to professional practice is taught as modules focusing on health and well-being, research, fieldwork, ethics, and policy and legislation.

L&T practices that focus on the stimulation of the development and integration of the self and the professional identity were identified and described as case studies, photovoice, self-evaluation, and reflections (cf. Carden et al., 2021). The participants highlighted that value is placed on students' realities. This description relates to student-centred L&T where students are encouraged to explore their understanding of the self, and how this relates to their professional identities (Bayram-Jacobs & Hayirsever, 2016). The participants further mentioned the benefit of reflective activities in L&T and how L&T therefore creates a space for students to be exposed to diverse contexts.

Another aspect which was highlighted by the educator participants was the value of building on L&T across the year levels, also referred to as scaffolding (Taber (2018). This author argues that scaffolding can result in educators becoming primarily facilitators where students gradually integrate the required knowledge/skills in their engagements with learning. In this study, the participants indicated that scaffolding was used over the course of the study programme to deepen the learning experience and reflective practices. As an example, they referred to self-awareness being addressed in a first-year module as a way to locate the development of the self vis-à-vis professional practice, which is then built upon over the course of the study years.

The development of the self and differentiation between personal and professional identity formation was described by the participants as a challenge for the students. They reported experiences where students struggle to separate their individual selves from the process of social work. Other challenges identified by the educator participants that impact the development of the self vis-à-vis professional practice were language barriers, social work not being a first choice of study for some, and a lack of attention to personal trauma that affects their professional development and engagement with practice.

Thirdly, perceptions of the potential of storytelling as a L&T tool were shared. The participating educators recognised the value of allowing students to articulate their stories, and to reflect how these stories relate to professional practice. It was also

acknowledged that storytelling as a L&T tool serves to empower students in becoming aware of unresolved problems and addressing their own healing as preparation for practice. This confirms Törrönen et al.'s (2013) position that empowerment, when utilised as a L&T tool, helps students gain better control of their lives and enables them to develop and express their professional identities.

#### **6.2.2.2 Student social workers**

The **participating student social workers** presented their perceptions according to two themes from which a number of sub-themes and categories emerged. As a first theme, the participating students described their perceptions and experiences of L&T practices that include a focus on the development of the self by referring to modules where the development of the self was included, their description of the value of the inclusion of the development of the self in L&T, and challenges/limitations regarding the inclusion of developing the self in the curriculum.

Referring to modules where the development of the self was included, the participants referred to a “who am I” activity that was introduced in a first-year module. They reported that, throughout the four-year programme, educators refer back to this activity so that students can continue reflecting on their development. In describing the value of the inclusion of developing the self in L&T, the student participants explained that it gave them an opportunity to be recognised as individuals. They further discussed additional benefits, including increased self-awareness, the ability to distinguish between the personal and professional self, and the development of self-confidence.

In terms of self-awareness, they pointed out that they became aware of the difference between their own and professional values, and that this supported them to recognise themselves as persons with real experiences. A participant shared that self-awareness also contributed to healing past traumas that may influence professional practice (cf. Oyserman et al., 2012). It was also noted that L&T activities focusing on the self and lecturers engaging in these activities supported self-awareness and the ability to differentiate between the personal and professional self to ensure professional practice (cf. SACSSP, 2012). The participants explained how a balance is needed in this regard. In terms of being empowered, they noted that such activities assist them with setting boundaries, becoming more outspoken, and standing up for themselves.

With regard to limitations/challenges experienced, the participating students referred to the conflict between the personal self and the professional self, and their difficulty to distinguish between the two. They explained that when the focus is on the professional self, the personal self is being neglected. Some participating students regarded the "who am I" activity as an assessment task and mentioned that its evaluative nature deterred them from being open and honest due to the fear of receiving a low grade. However, they added that despite the challenge of being assessed, they were able to benefit from it when the activity was repeated over the subsequent years of study. Another challenge was noted, as educators often failed to consider the students' contexts, making it difficult for them to meet assignment deadlines and manage their workloads.

As a second theme, the student participants described the potential value of storytelling as a L&T tool as supporting self-awareness, empowering potential, and contributing to professional development. A participant noted that the opportunity to tell stories in the classroom can create awareness of students' contexts among educators. They also pointed out that storytelling provided an opportunity to identify vulnerable aspects in oneself through reflection on one's own life (cf. George, 2021) and by hearing about others' experiences. This, in turn, helped in developing self-awareness through the sharing of experiences (cf. Ketelle, 2017).

According to the participating students, the awareness that may be stimulated through storytelling may lead to empowering them, as storytelling may provide a platform to feel free to share their stories without judgements. These insights were linked to professional development, and students reported, in line with the hermeneutical approach (cf. Zimmermann, 2015), that a personal narrative can guide them to become aware of personal issues that need to be addressed in order to engage with the profession. The participants further described the potential value of storytelling as being able to relate to clients, a tool that can be used in interventions, and a way to distinguish between the personal and professional identity. Furthermore, storytelling assists, according to the student participants, with reflection on their own experiences in practice, which could contribute to learning within supervision settings. This point is supported by the description of the reflective learning model, described by Rankine (2017) as way to encourage professional development through reflections on what happened in practice, and what could be learned from these reflections.

After participating in a storytelling activity framed in the AI model, the participating students participated in a second focus group. Four themes were identified from the data obtained during this focus group: 1) experiences of writing their stories; 2) experiences of sharing their stories; 3) experiences of using the AI framework; and 4) the potential to integrate personal experiences with professional development.

Regarding the process of writing their own stories, the participating students reported experiencing a sense of empowerment through a deeper sense of awareness. They mentioned that they overcame the fear of reflecting on their own past experiences and being vulnerable when sharing their stories (cf. Ketelle, 2017). The participants reported that by writing their stories, they became aware of different options to deal with challenges, indicating the self-help potential of storytelling. They explained that this process gave them hope to deal with challenges (cf. McAdams and McLean, 2013). It was also mentioned that self-awareness stimulates positive change and highlights one's own value and purpose, reflecting a cognitive activity involving engagement with one's own inter-, intrapersonal and contextual experiences (cf. Rasheed et al., 2019). This process requires reflection on oneself and on others (cf. Simon & Trötschel, 2008). Additionally, empowerment was linked to the ability to learn through reflective practices, aligning with Davy and Beddoe's (2010) description of reflective learning as a potential value of writing one's own stories.

Experiences of sharing their stories were described in terms of a safe space to share stories that can liberate all the participants in the activity. The participants indicated that they experienced a lack of judgment within the framework of the activity, and they also observed how participants shared both differences and similarities. Carden et al. (2021), in support of this finding, assert that the feedback and responses of others when stories are shared, may contribute to a non-judgemental way in which one can develop an understanding of oneself within a specific context. In terms of feeling liberated during the sharing of stories, the participants described how they felt brave and important, experienced being valued as others listened to them and indicated that they understood what was being shared, and that this led to an experience of emotional well-being (cf. Afuape & Hughes, 2018). Discussing the experience of storytelling as being liberating to others, the participants explained that it enhances listening skills and fosters an awareness that similarities exist despite diversity within the group (cf. Turton & Schmid, 2020). The participating students

explained how empathy was experienced while listening to the stories of others (cf. Cuff et al., 2014).

Reflecting on the use of the AI framework to develop their stories, the participants referred to the value of the four stages of the framework that provided them with structure on the one hand, and with control of the outcome of their stories on the other hand. Afuape and Hughes (2018) also refer to a sense of empowerment that is experienced when having the freedom to making choices while constructing a story. Another aspect that was highlighted was the fact that the framework contributed to a thinking process that assisted them to solve real-life problems (cf. Arneja & Tyagie, 2020). Self-awareness was again indicated as an outcome of creating stories within the AI framework. In support of this finding and in line with the focus of this study, Brailas and Sotiropoulou (2023) assert that the experience of self-awareness leads to self-development.

The participants identified only one aspect that they thought did not work well in the activity, referring to the period in which it was done as too short. They indicated that they wanted more time to engage with the activity. A participant explained that the mere writing of the story was experienced as a therapeutic activity. The participating students again referred to the value of the structure and logic flow provided by the 4 Ds of AI, and that they were able to learn from each other's stories and how each one constructed their stories. Cooperrider et al. (2008) highlight that AI aims to develop the potential of participants by exploring mutual strengths, and encouraging exchanges and sharing experiences (Cooperrider et al., 2008). The student participants also mentioned that it assisted them to integrate the social work principle in their personal stories, and continued to explain that the small groups and the way in which the activity was facilitated benefited their experiences (cf. Flewitt et al., 2016).

In the final theme, the participating students explored the potential of storytelling in the AI framework to integrate personal experiences with professional development by including a focus on social work principles. They indicated three principles that they chose based on the relation to their personal stories, namely respect for diversity, human rights, and collective responsibility. In a conclusion, it was noted that storytelling has the potential to also assist social workers to gain an understanding of their clients' social realities, and in this way a respect for human rights can manifest.

The conclusions that are presented next are based on the summary of the research methodology and findings above.

## **6.3 CONCLUSIONS**

The conclusions presented in this section are supported by the discussion that focuses on the research methodology and the findings of this study, as derived from the summaries provided in the previous section.

### **6.3.1 Conclusions Pertaining to the Research Methodology**

The interpretive paradigm served as an effective worldview from which the qualitative research approach was conducted. This approach emphasised the importance of exploring the narratives of personal experiences and perceptions among multiple groups of people closely linked to the research problem. Through this approach, interpretations could be made based on the verbatim quotes obtained from multiple sources. Through the qualitative research approach, the data obtained, and the findings presented are based on personal experiences and perceptions of student social worker and educator participants by means of their own descriptions.

The combination of the exploratory, descriptive, and contextual research designs influenced the selection of methods and techniques for sampling from the two populations, collecting data, and analysing the data, ultimately leading to the findings of this study. These designs played a crucial role in achieving the research aims and objectives.

It is concluded that focus groups are well suited for studies focusing on L&T activities. They enable participants to share their experiences and perceptions, fostering engaged discussions around the questions that are asked. Moreover, semi-structured questions provide a clear direction for the discussions without unduly constraining the participants' contributions. In this study, the semi-structured questions were carefully formulated to align with the problem statement, overall research questions, and research aims and objectives. This provided a structure for the collection of data, without restricting the participants to share what they considered important. As such, the chosen method was effective in this study, enabling participants to express themselves and convey their perceptions and experiences in their own words. This yielded rich and valuable data, ultimately aiding the researcher

in gaining a deeper understanding of the research problem, aligning with the aim of this study.

It is concluded that the research questions of this study were answered, and that the aims were attained, supported by the chosen methodology.

### **6.3.2 Conclusions Pertaining to The Research Findings**

The findings based on the experiences of student social workers who participated in the storytelling activity, confirmed the successful use of AI in storytelling as a L&T tool. They expressed that AI provided structure to their stories, and this sense of structure empowered them to take control of their narratives and, by extension, certain aspects of their lives. Being able to reshape their stories contributed to feeling in control of their lives, granting them the freedom to choose the stories they constructed and how they shared them. This newfound sense of control also highlighted the potential use of storytelling within the AI framework as an intervention tool in social work practice, aligning with the implementation of relevant social work principles.

The participating students valued the time required when constructing a story in writing. It can therefore be concluded that to write their story created time for contemplation and reflection, and simultaneously the opportunity to gain control of their story before sharing it verbally. The fact that students explored strengths, took part in dialogues, and shared their perceptions, experiences, and stories confirms the strengths-based nature of AI.

The input from the educator participants underscores the significance of incorporating activities and skills development to foster self-awareness in training and education. They reiterated the importance of empowering student social workers to cultivate and harmonise their personal and professional identities. Although a number of activities to stimulate self-awareness are already implemented in the curriculum, educators acknowledged that storytelling as a L&T tool could further assist students to become aware of their own unresolved problems that could provide an opportunity for them to address past hurt that may impact their engagement with client systems. It is thus concluded that storytelling may serve as a way to prepare students for practice. It is further concluded that storytelling can be helpful not only in L&T, but also as an intervention tool in practice.

As educators accentuated the value of building on L&T across year-levels, it can be concluded that storytelling will be beneficial in terms of scaffolding, as L&T

takes place across the four-year programme. This will therefore address the reported challenge of students struggling to differentiate between the personal and professional.

Importantly, the student participants highlighted that self-development activities included in assessments hindered them from openly and fully engaging with these activities. Consequently, it is concluded that storytelling, as a L&T tool, should not be utilised as an assessment activity to create a safe space for students to participate in storytelling activities. Reporting on the L&T environment, student participants indicated that having had a choice to either 'spontaneously' share their story or 'formally' read their stories when sharing, took pressure off the fear of not performing as expected because they were not going to be judged (i.e. assessed). The researcher therefore concludes that students desire some opportunity to explore themselves and share their experiences in a space where they are not being assessed, but still within the academic environment where L&T can take place. In line with this perspective, it is concluded that students' need for a safe space to explore themselves relates to their positive experience of not being forced to share their personal stories and that telling a story "whether it is your story or not" was empowering for them.

From the findings it is evident that the storytelling activity stimulated self-awareness in student social workers, and subsequently empowered them not only on a personal level, but also to reflect how this activity could be useful in their professional lives. The participation in this activity created opportunity for students to recognise the value of storytelling as an intervention tool in practice.

This study was framed in the AI model to introduce storytelling as a L&T tool to support the development of the self in relation to professional practice (Cf. Ogude et al., 2019). The researcher concludes that the AI model is a suitable framework where reflective thinking through storytelling can be stimulated to gain an awareness of the personal self, and to draw a link with the professional identity.

## **6.4 RECOMMENDATIONS**

Considering the conclusions above, recommendations with regard to social work education and training as well as further research are made.

### **6.4.1 Recommendations for Social Work Education and Training**

The following recommendations are made:

- Incorporate storytelling as a L&T tool in all modules that emphasise self and professional development.
- Educators should receive training on how to effectively integrate storytelling into their L&T practices.
- Integrate storytelling into fieldwork modules to help students gain awareness of their experiences in practice settings, understand the influence of their personal perceptions and experiences, and learn to strike a balance between their personal and professional identities.
- Avoid using storytelling as an assessment activity to create a safe space for personal and professional development.
- Conduct storytelling activities in small groups to foster a supportive and comfortable atmosphere for sharing personal stories.
- Provide clear instructions and modelling for storytelling activities, emphasising how to include the 4 Ds of AI to frame the stories. This ensures that problems are approached with a focus on exploring options for effective problem-solving.

### **6.4.2 Recommendations for Further Research**

Recommendations for further research are:

- Explore experiences and perceptions of student social workers and educators from various universities, provinces, and year-levels to gain a broader understanding of the use of storytelling as a learning and teaching tool in social work education and training.
- Investigate the potential of digital storytelling as a learning and teaching tool to empower and equip student social workers for practice.
- Conduct a quantitative study using a questionnaire developed based on the findings of this qualitative study to validate and expand on the results, involving a larger number of participants for a more comprehensive analysis.

- Conduct further research into storytelling as a tool for social work practice.

## 6.5 CONCLUSION

This study has contributed contextually relevant insights to enhance social work education and training. By integrating storytelling within the AI model framework, recommendations have been proposed for utilising storytelling as an effective pedagogical tool in social work education, particularly in fostering self-awareness for professional identity development.

The study successfully addressed its research questions and aims, while also acknowledging and addressing challenges and limitations. The significance of this research lies in its potential to advance innovative L&T practices that empower students, ultimately benefiting the individuals and communities they will serve in their professional practice.

The anticipated outcome of this study is to make a meaningful contribution to the field of social work education and training. It aims to provide students with the tools and empowerment needed to realise their full potential, benefiting both the social work profession and their personal growth. In the words of the renowned American social worker, storyteller, and researcher, Brené Brown (2018):

*“When we have the courage to walk into our story and own it,  
we get to write the ending”.*

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# ANNEXURES

## ANNEXURE A: Ethical Clearance



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10 December 2021

Mrs M Van Heerden  
Social Work  
Faculty of Community and Health Sciences

HSSREC Reference Number: HS21/10/25

**Project Title:** Towards professional identity: The development of the Self among student social workers through storytelling.

**Approval Period:** 10 December 2021 – 10 December 2024

I hereby certify that the Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Western Cape approved the methodology, and amendments to the ethics of the above mentioned research project.

Any amendments, extension or other modifications to the protocol must be submitted to the Ethics Committee for approval.

**Please remember to submit a progress report by 30 November each year for the duration of the project.**

For permission to conduct research using student and/or staff data or to distribute research surveys/questionnaires please apply via:  
<https://sites.google.com/uwc.ac.za/permissionresearch/home>

*The permission letter must then be submitted to HSSREC for record keeping purposes.*

The Committee must be informed of any serious adverse events and/or termination of the study.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Josias'.

*Ms Patricia Josias  
Research Ethics Committee Officer  
University of the Western Cape*

## ANNEXURE B: Request to Do Research Among Students



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### DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK

**The Registrar's Office: University of the Western Cape**

**Dear Sir/madam**

**Title of Research Project:** Towards professional identity: The development of the Self among student social workers through storytelling

My name is Marika van Heerden. I am a Masters in Social Work (MSW) student in the Department of Social Work at the University of Western Cape. For the purpose of this degree, I am conducting a research study that has been approved by the University of the Western Cape's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. The research aim is to explore and describe how storytelling can empower student social workers to develop and integrate the Self and the professional identity as well as to explore and describe how the Appreciative Inquiry model can be used as a framework for storytelling in learning and teaching activities.

I am requesting permission to conduct research with fourth year student social workers. I am providing you with the information letter to the participants, the research proposal, as well as proof of ethical clearance.

Should you have any questions regarding this study, please contact the study supervisor:

- Prof M. Van der Westhuizen  
Social Work Department, University of the Western Cape  
Private Bag x17, Bellville, 7535
- Telephone: (021) 959 2851
- E-mail: [mvanderwesthuizen@uwc.ac.za](mailto:mvanderwesthuizen@uwc.ac.za)

This research has been approved by the University of the Western Cape's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (**REFERENCE NUMBER:** HS21/10/25).

- Address: Private Bag X17, Bellville, 7535
- Tel: 021 959 4111
- E-mail: [research-ethics@uwc.ac.za](mailto:research-ethics@uwc.ac.za)

Kind regards,

Marika Van Heerden

## ANNEXURE C: Information Letters



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### DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK

#### Social work educators

**Project Title:** Towards professional identity: The development of the Self among student social workers through storytelling

#### What is this study about?

This is a research project being conducted by Marika van Heerden at the University of the Western Cape. I am conducting this study for a Master of Social Work degree in the Department of Social Work, under the supervision of Prof M van der Westhuizen. I am inviting you to participate in this research project because you are a lecturer of student social workers, with the task, amongst others, to equip them to develop a professional identity. The purpose of this research project is 1) to explore and describe how storytelling can empower student social workers to develop and integrate the Self and the professional identity, and 2) to explore and describe how the Appreciative Inquiry model can be used as a framework for storytelling in learning and teaching activities.

#### What will I be asked to do if I agree to participate?

You will be requested to sign a consent form which confirms your decision to participate voluntarily. Once you provided this consent, a time and place will be arranged for you to take part in a focus group discussion with other social work educators in your Department. This will be arranged to suit all the participants' needs. Depending on the COVID-19 situation, the focus group may take place on Google Meets. The focus group discussion will last about 60 to 90 minutes. You will be asked to share your experiences and perceptions on current learning and teaching practices regarding the development and integration of the Self and the professional identity in social work education and training through.

#### Would my participation in this study be kept confidential?

This study will use focus groups and the extent to which your identity will remain confidential is dependent on participants' in the focus group maintaining confidentiality. All the participants will be asked to sign a focus group confidentiality binding form. In addition, you will be asked permission that the researcher can audio-record the focus group. Should you choose not to give permission for this, your answers and contributions will be recorded by means of field notes. The recording will be transcribed immediately after interview, and the recording will be locked in a safe space to which only the researcher and her supervisor will have access. The researcher undertakes to protect your identity and the nature of your contribution. To ensure your anonymity, your name will not appear on the transcript of the focus group. A number will be assigned to your name, for example 'Participant 1', and a list will be made that links the numbers to the identity of the participants. This list will be stored on a password protected computer to which only the researcher will have access. All documents will be destroyed five

years after that study was completed. If I write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected.

In accordance with legal requirements and/or professional standards, any disclosure of abuse or harm made during the research process by you or any other participant, has to be reported. In this event, I will inform you that I have to break confidentiality to fulfil my legal responsibility to report to the designated authorities.

### **What are the risks of this research?**

All human interactions and talking about self or others carry some amount of risks. I will nevertheless minimise such risks and act promptly to assist you if you experience any discomfort, psychological or otherwise during the process of your participation in this study. Where necessary, an appropriate referral will be made to a suitable professional for further assistance or intervention.

### **What are the benefits of this research?**

This research is not designed to help you personally, but the results may help the researcher learn more current learning and teaching practices regarding the development and integration of the Self and the professional identity in social work education and training through storytelling in the Appreciative Inquiry model.

I hope that, in the future, social work educators and students might benefit from this study through improved understanding of how storytelling within the Appreciative Inquiry framework can assist students to develop and integrate the Self and their professional identity.

### **Do I have to be in this research and may I stop participating at any time?**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalised or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.

### **What if I have questions?**

This research is being conducted by Marika van Heerden under the auspices of the Department of Social Work at the University of the Western Cape. If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact me at: 18 Main street, Linden Ext, Randburg Johannesburg, or at telephone 0824644501 or sending me an email to [4205337@myuwc.ac.za](mailto:4205337@myuwc.ac.za) / [marikavh123@icloud.com](mailto:marikavh123@icloud.com).

Should you have any questions regarding this study and your rights as a research participant or if you wish to report any problems you have experienced related to the study, please contact:

Prof Marichen van der Westhuizen Department of Social Work: Head of Department Faculty of Community and Health Sciences University of the Western Cape Tel: 021 9592851 Email: <a href="mailto:mvdwesthuizen@uwc.ac.za">mvdwesthuizen@uwc.ac.za</a>	Prof Anthea Rhoda Dean: Faculty of Community and Health Sciences University of the Western Cape Private Bag X17 Bellville 7535 <a href="mailto:chs-deansoffice@uwc.ac.za">chs-deansoffice@uwc.ac.za</a>	Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee: University of the Western Cape Private Bag X17 Bellville 7535 Tel: 021 959 4111 e-mail: <a href="mailto:research-ethics@uwc.ac.za">research-ethics@uwc.ac.za</a>
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This research has been approved by the University of the Western Cape's Senate Research Committee and Ethics Committee.

**REFERENCE NUMBER:** HS21/10/25

Your participation will be much appreciated.

Kind regards,  
 Marika Van Heerden



## **Student social workers**

**Project Title:** Towards professional identity: The development of the Self among student social workers through storytelling

### **What is this study about?**

This is a research project being conducted by Marika van Heerden at the University of the Western Cape. I am conducting this study for a Master of Social Work degree in the Department of Social Work, under the supervision of Prof M van der Westhuizen. I am inviting you to participate in this research project because you are a fourth-year social work student on the verge of entering the professional world as a qualified social worker. The purpose of this research project is 1) to explore and describe how storytelling can empower student social workers to develop and integrate the Self and the professional identity, and 2) to explore and describe how the Appreciative Inquiry model can be used as a framework for storytelling in learning and teaching activities.

### **What will I be asked to do if I agree to participate?**

You will be requested to take part in a focus group that will reflect on your perceptions and experiences regarding the research topic, as well as in a focus group where we will use storytelling to assist you to reflect on your self-development and the development of your professional identity. You will be requested to sign a consent form which confirms your decision to participate voluntarily. Once you provided this consent, a time and place will be arranged for you to take part in a focus group discussion with fellow student social workers. This will be arranged to suit all the participants' needs. Depending on the COVID-19 situation, the focus group discussion may take place on Google Meets. The focus group where we will use storytelling will be face-to-face. Due to the pandemic, this will take place in a ventilated room, and we will all use hand sanitizers, wear masks and maintain a distance of at least 1.5 meter from each other. This will entail 6 sessions that will last about 60 to 90 minutes.

### **Would my participation in this study be kept confidential?**

This study will use focus groups and the extent to which your identity will remain confidential is dependent on participants' in the focus group maintaining confidentiality. All the participants will be asked to sign a focus group confidentiality binding form. In addition, you will be asked permission that the researcher can audio-record the focus group. Should you choose not to give permission for this, your answers and contributions will be recorded by means of field notes. The recording will be transcribed immediately after interview, and the recording will be locked in a safe space to which only the researcher and her supervisor will have access. The researcher undertakes to protect your identity and the nature of your contribution. To ensure your anonymity, your name will not appear on the transcript of the focus group. A number will be assigned to your name, for example 'Participant 1', and a list will be made that links the numbers to the identity of the participants. This list will be stored on a password protected computer to which only the researcher will have access. All documents will be destroyed five years after that study was completed. If I write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected.

In accordance with legal requirements and/or professional standards, any disclosure of abuse or harm made during the research process by you or any other participant, has to be reported. In this event, I will inform you that I have to break confidentiality to fulfil my legal responsibility to report to the designated authorities.

**What are the risks of this research?**

All human interactions and talking about self or others carry some amount of risks. I will nevertheless minimise such risks and act promptly to assist you if you experience any discomfort, psychological or otherwise during the process of your participation in this study. Where necessary, an appropriate referral will be made to a suitable professional for further assistance or intervention.

**What are the benefits of this research?**

This research is not designed to help you personally, but the results may help the researcher learn more current learning and teaching practices regarding the development and integration of the Self and the professional identity in social work education and training through storytelling in the Appreciative Inquiry model.

I hope that, in the future, social work educators and students might benefit from this study through improved understanding of how storytelling within the Appreciative Inquiry framework can assist students to develop and integrate the Self and their professional identity.

**Do I have to be in this research and may I stop participating at any time?**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalised or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.

**What if I have questions?**

This research is being conducted by Marika van Heerden under the auspices of the Department of Social Work at the University of the Western Cape. If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact me at: 18 Main street, Linden Ext, Randburg Johannesburg, or at telephone 0824644501 or sending me an email to 4205337@myuwc.ac.za / marikavh123@icloud.com.

Should you have any questions regarding this study and your rights as a research participant or if you wish to report any problems you have experienced related to the study, please contact:

Prof Marichen van der Westhuizen Department of Social Work: Head of Department Faculty of Community and Health Sciences University of the Western Cape Tel: 021 9592851 Email: <a href="mailto:mvdwesthuizen@uwc.ac.za">mvdwesthuizen@uwc.ac.za</a>	Prof Anthea Rhoda Dean: Faculty of Community and Health Sciences University of the Western Cape Private Bag X17 Bellville 7535 <a href="mailto:chs-deansoffice@uwc.ac.za">chs- deansoffice@uwc.ac.za</a>	Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee: University of the Western Cape Private Bag X17 Bellville 7535 Tel: 021 959 4111 e-mail: <a href="mailto:research-ethics@uwc.ac.za">research- ethics@uwc.ac.za</a>
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This research has been approved by the University of the Western Cape's Senate Research Committee and Ethics Committee.

**REFERENCE NUMBER:** HS21/10/25

Your participation will be much appreciated.

Kind regards,  
Marika Van Heerden



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**ANNEXURE D: Consent Form**



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**DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK**

**Project title:** Towards professional identity: The development of the Self among student social workers through storytelling

The study has been described to me in language that I understand. My questions about the study have been answered. I understand what my participation will involve and I agree to participate of my own choice and free will. I understand that my identity will not be disclosed to anyone. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason and without fear of negative consequences or loss of benefits.

I agree that the interview may be audio recorded:

Please indicate your response with an X.

Yes:

No:

Participant's name.....

Participant's signature.....

Date.....

Should you have any questions regarding this study and your rights as a research participant or if you wish to report any problems you have experienced related to the study, please contact:

Prof Marichen van der Westhuizen Department of Social Work: Head of Department Faculty of Community and Health Sciences University of the Western Cape Tel: 021 9592851 Email: <a href="mailto:mvdwesthuizen@uwc.ac.za">mvdwesthuizen@uwc.ac.za</a>	Prof Anthea Rhoda Dean: Faculty of Community and Health Sciences University of the Western Cape Private Bag X17 Bellville 7535 <a href="mailto:chs-deansoffice@uwc.ac.za">chs-deansoffice@uwc.ac.za</a>	Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee: University of the Western Cape Private Bag X17 Bellville 7535 Tel: 021 959 4111 e-mail: <a href="mailto:research-ethics@uwc.ac.za">research-ethics@uwc.ac.za</a>
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## ANNEXURE E: Focus Group Confidentiality Binding Form



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### DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK

**Project Title:** Towards professional identity: The development of the Self among student social workers through storytelling

The study has been described to me in language that I understand. My questions about the study have been answered. I understand what my participation will involve and I agree to participate of my own choice and free will. I understand that my identity will not be disclosed to anyone. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason and without fear of negative consequences or loss of benefits. I understand that confidentiality is dependent on participants' in the focus group maintaining confidentiality. I hereby agree to the following:

I agree to uphold the confidentiality of the discussions in the focus group by not disclosing the identity of other participants or any aspects of their contributions to members outside of the group.

Should you have any questions regarding this study or wish to report any problems you have experienced related to the study, please contact the study supervisor: Prof M.A. Van der Westhuizen; email: [mvanderwesthuizen@uwc.ac.za](mailto:mvanderwesthuizen@uwc.ac.za).

Participant's name.....

Participant's signature.....

Date.....

## ANNEXURE F: Interview Guide



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### DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK

#### Questions to social work educators

- What are your perceptions and experiences regarding the core knowledge requirement of the development of the Self vis-à-vis professional practice, as stipulated in the BSW's qualification standards?
- What current activities are you using to stimulate the development and the integration of the Self and the professional identity?
  - In what modules do you include these activities?
  - What works well?
  - What challenges/limitations are you experiencing?
- What do you think of the potential of storytelling as a learning and teaching tool?

#### Questions to student social workers

##### Focus group 1:

- What learning and teaching activities assisted you thus far to develop your sense of Self and your professional identity?
  - In what modules do these activities take place?
  - What works well?
  - What challenges/limitations are you experiencing?
- What do you think of the potential of storytelling as a learning and teaching tool?

##### Focus group 2:

##### *Introduction session*

The principles of social work will be presented to the group of students who will participate in the storytelling activity. They will be asked to choose one principle that they want to focus on in their stories.

Next, they will be presented with some guidelines to use when writing their stories, including the framework of how to introduce the story, how to frame the content of their story, and how to draw a conclusion to end the story.

The students will also be informed that they will write four sections on their story, which will be shared in the focus group. They will be asked to choose topics and content that they will be comfortable with to share with other students in the focus group.

*Session 1 - Discovery: Appreciate the best of 'what is*

Students will be asked to choose a principle of social work and think about how this principle has been experienced in their own lives. They will then be requested to write about this experience and reflect on how it has been impacting on their studies and their professional development – identifying challenges that they experience.

*Session 2 - Dream: What might be?*

Students will continue to reflect and write about what they think is needed for them to address challenges and make sense of past experiences so that they can be empowered to address such challenges in practice.

*Session 3 Design: What should be?*

Using the content of their stories thus far, the students describe what they will do, why they will do it, how they will do it, and what resources they will need to address what is needed for the development of the Self and the professional identity.

*Session 4 - Destiny: Reach for the dream.*

As a conclusion to their stories, the students will describe how the previous steps will empower them on a personal and professional level; their desired outcomes.

*Concluding session*

Students will be asked to reflect on their experiences regarding storytelling within the AI framework.

- How did you experience the opportunity to write your story?
- How did you experience sharing your story?
- How did the four sections support you to develop your story?
- What worked best for you?
- What did not work well for you?
- How do you think this can assist you to implement the principle you chose in practice, while also considering your own experiences?