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## **Re-contextualising occupational ethos, identity and agency: cross-reflections of care practitioners and their educators in human service work**

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### **Background**

There is much concern in both the national policy agenda and the media in Finland about an impending shortage of labour in human service work, and about its declining attraction as an occupational choice, especially for young people. In this paper, I take issue with the argument that this arises from the recruitment of inadequate students, employees or initial educators in the field of health and social care. There is a need, instead, to consider that societal and organisational problems such as the general recruitment crisis, complaints about over- and under-education or credential disparity, unclear divisions of labour in workplaces, skill discrepancies, work overload and ethical conflicts have their roots in the neoliberal policy framework that has been implemented in Finland since the 1990s. Following this policy shift and related institutional restructuring, an overall erosion of work-related social rights, employment security and occupational recognition is apparent, along with increasing difficulties in occupational anchorage, commitment and lived experiences of dignity in human service work.

### **Research Questions**

In this paper, I highlight welfare state change by investigating its implications for the reconfiguration of human service workforce, ethos and agency. Retrenchment of the '90s changed the terms and the conditions of the blooming welfare state of the '70s and '80s in Finland. I examine ways in which the welfare policy of the contemporary 'competition state' - implemented in the form of decentralisation of state governance, reorganisation of the welfare service systems and activating employment strategies together with life-long learning reforms - reorders human service work across diverse spaces, e.g. administrative sectors, educational institutions and levels, occupational territories and trade union affiliations.

This paper is about cross-reflecting the disturbances in the worlds of work and education of care practitioners and their educators in human service work. My entry point is the upper secondary level occupation titled practical nurses for social and health care (in Finnish lähihoitaja: a care worker near to you). I have previously studied the occupational and educational orders and identity challenges of this trans-sector occupation (Henriksson 2008, 2009, Wrede et al. 2008). Here, I turn my attention to their educators, by highlighting how educational work in this field is being re-ordered across diversified learning spaces. I am interested in reconfigurations of the teaching workforce, for instance, occupational segmentation, trans-sector divisions of labour and hierarchies, and trade union affiliations. Furthermore, I examine what kind of implications these transformations have for care-work educators' professional ethos, identity and collective agency.

### **Methods**

The research reviews the literature on vocational educators, as well as relevant policy and trade union documents. It also draws on pilot interviews with teachers of practical nurses.

### **Frame**

This enquiry draws on the collective work by Seddon, Henriksson and Niemeyer (2009) which elaborates a methodological approach that contributes to analysing occupational boundary work in human service work. I argue that globalisation, euro-centric development and multi-governance require inclusive research frames that pay attention to policy interplay, dissonance and mismatch.

This approach is needed because occupations in human service work are affected by same policy disturbances and they share ethical commitments and gendered occupational expectations. Inclusive framing also exceeds fixed occupational and disciplinary territories and challenge their narrow and exclusive research interests. Neoliberal institutional orders rather re-establish us-them relations than permit orientation towards collective identification and agency which was the ethos of the former welfare state. Inclusive research designs are therefore required to surpass a 'sector gaze', 'grade gaze' or 'territory gaze' and to open up space to dialogue. Yet this is the very challenge of the new welfare-mix environments of human service work.

## **Research findings**

Education reforms since the early 90s have both split and integrated education institutions and created new demarcations between educational levels. The education reform of practical nurses created a shared trans-sectoral occupational territory for health care and social care by integrating seven health care occupations and three social care occupations into one umbrella curriculum. Furthermore, the reform created three segments of teachers: polytechnic teachers, upper-secondary level teachers and adult educators, as the leader of the social and health care teachers' union argued in her 10-year jubilee address. New divisions and hierarchies were established, but the overall upgrading of educational standards was true for both care-work educators and care practitioners.

The making of a collaborative human service workforce is the key element in welfare policy in Europe, as in Finland - but within limits. On the lower levels of occupational hierarchies, something tangible is happening. I have addressed these changes from the viewpoint of frontline care workers, the practical nurses, and introduced evidence on their vague occupational position, segmentation and inequalities; experiences of being unknown and being 'trapped' between sectors, grades, credentials and trade union competition. However, in addition to this, for one-third of the recruits the education reform opened up an education pathway to higher education to become a nurse or a social worker (a polytechnic degree). Evidence on the reconfiguration of the care-work educators' occupation highlights similar developments. My preliminary observations demonstrate the gendered hierarchies among care-work educators as well as the developing of a stronger trade unionist agency using pay equity claims as a vehicle to reach the professional status of male colleagues in the occupational territories of technology and transport.

Rather than seeing human service work practitioners and their educators - two case examples contrasted in this paper - having an un-fit professional ethos and identity as the problem to be disciplined, I recognise them as citizen-employees holding the turbulent service systems (vocational education and welfare services) together, creating agency and accommodating their ethos and commitment to those institutional inadequacies of opportunities that the new policy framework implies.