

PERSPECTIVE: Valuing Our Direct Support Professional Knowledge and Practice in Social Work Education

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Abstract

This reflective paper examines how direct support professional (DSP) experience functions as a foundational site of learning within social work education. Drawing on our shared DSP backgrounds and guided by Schön's (1983) reflective practice and Fook's (2012) model of critical reflection, we analyze how frontline disability support work generates relational, ethical, and practice-based knowledge that is often undervalued within formal curricula. We highlight the complexity of DSP practice, including relational labour, advocacy, and moment-to-moment ethical decision-making, while also acknowledging the tensions of care and control embedded in institutional systems shaped by ableism, colonialism, and risk-averse policies.

Our reflections illustrate how DSP experience enriches peer learning, exposes gaps in social work curricula related to intellectual and developmental disability, and reveals forms of epistemic injustice that marginalize experiential knowledge. We argue that integrating DSP perspectives can strengthen social work education by foregrounding disability, power, relational ethics, and the structural conditions that shape frontline practice.

Introduction

Situating Direct Support Professional Knowledge and Practice within Social Work Education and Intellectual and Developmental Disability Practice.

Social work students encounter intellectual and developmental disability (IDD) through multiple and often overlapping pathways as they move toward professional practice. For some, this

engagement begins prior to entering social work education through employment in developmental service settings¹, most commonly in frontline direct support professional (DSP) roles, where they provide person-centered support to individuals with IDD, assisting with daily living, community participation, and navigation of service systems in ways that support autonomy and self-determination (Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence, n.d.). Others work in developmental services while completing their social work education, navigating frontline practice alongside academic training. Students may also be drawn to IDD practice through personal experience, including living as a person with a disability or as a parent or family member of an individual with IDD (McCann et al., 2023). Finally, some social work students develop an interest in IDD through field placement experiences, where practicum placements within the developmental services sector introduce them to the complexities of disability-related practice for the first time (Russo-Gleicher, 2008). While not all social work students who encounter IDD through these pathways go on to remain in disability-focused practice, for many, working with individuals with IDD functions as an opportunity that shapes their professional values, ethical awareness, and understanding of the relational and structural dimensions of care across diverse areas of social work practice.

Despite the centrality of disability to social justice and equity-oriented practice, intellectual and developmental disability remains marginalized within Canadian social work education. The Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE) has incorporated commitments to equity, diversity, and the inclusion of marginalized groups within its accreditation standards (Canadian Association for Social Work Education, 2021); however, there is no explicit requirement for curricula to address intellectual and developmental disability. As a result, disability, and IDD in particular, continues to receive inconsistent and often only incidental attention across social work programs. This is both surprising and unsurprising, as this marginalization in social work curricula is not new. Over two decades ago, Burge et al. (1999) identified significant gaps in coursework on developmental disabilities in Canadian schools of social work. Subsequent scholarship has demonstrated that these gaps persist, with disability content frequently relegated to elective courses, only briefly addressed within broader diversity frameworks, or omitted altogether (Dunn et al., 2006). The absence of sustained and explicit engagement with IDD in accredited curricula both reflects and reproduces the marginal positioning of disability within the profession, leaving many social work students underprepared to critically engage with the realities of IDD practice (John & Schrandt, 2019; Laws et al., 2010).

Our reflective contribution is grounded in our shared yet distinct positionalities as DSPs across different stages of social work education. Teri-Lyn and Kia draw on their current/recent DSP experiences as social work students, bringing practice-based knowledge of IDD into the classroom through discussions, assignments, and peer learning encounters. Anna reflects both on her experiences as a former long-time DSP during her own social work education and on her current role as a faculty member, where she intentionally integrates IDD perspectives into social work teaching through formal curriculum, informal learning spaces, and research mentorship of students. Our positionalities locate these reflections at multiple points within social work education, allowing us to consider how DSP knowledge circulates across student and faculty roles, and how experiential knowledge of IDD practice is introduced, negotiated, and taken up

¹ In the Ontario context where we are located, “developmental services” refers to the service sector that provides support to adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

within educational contexts that often lack sustained curricular attention to intellectual and developmental disability (John & Schrandt, 2019; Laws et al., 2010).

The purpose of this reflective paper is to critically examine how our experiences as DSPs have shaped our social work education and practice, particularly in relation to IDD. Drawing on our respective experiences as current and former DSPs, we contribute to social work education scholarship by foregrounding our frontline, practice-based knowledge that is frequently rendered invisible or undervalued within formal curricula. We position our DSP work as a complex and generative site of learning, one that makes visible both the possibilities and the structural constraints of frontline practice within institutional systems of care.

Grounded in Schön's (1983) conceptualization of *reflective practice*, we understand DSP work as an ongoing site of professional knowledge production, where learning occurs through action, ethical decision-making, relational engagement, and navigation of institutional demands. By centering DSP experience as legitimate professional knowledge, this paper extends scholarly conversations on reflective practice, disability inclusion, and epistemic authority in social work education. While we draw on Schön's (1983) conceptualization of reflective practice, our analysis also aligns with Fook's (2012) model of *critical reflection*, which emphasizes examining the power relations, assumptions, and structural contexts that shape practice. Schön's (1983) reflective practice and Fook's (2012) critical reflection allow us to analyze DSP work both as a site of experiential learning and as a practice embedded within broader structures of power.

Within this framework, this paper advances three key objectives. First, we seek to affirm the value of our knowledge, skills, and lived experiences as DSPs, positioning this work as foundational to our development as social work practitioners rather than as peripheral or pre-professional experience. Second, we critically examine the dual nature of DSP work as both a site of care and, at times, a site of control and oppression, reflecting on how navigating these tensions has shaped our ethical awareness, critical consciousness, and understanding of power within social work practice. Third, we consider how drawing on DSP experience can enrich peer learning within social work education by addressing gaps in curricular attention to IDD, and by contributing relational, practice-based insights that extend beyond formal course content.

Affirming DSP Knowledge as Foundational to Social Work Practice

Direct support professionals play a central yet often underrecognized role in supporting adults with IDD across residential, community, and day-to-day life settings (Hewitt & Larson, 2007). DSP work extends well beyond task-based assistance and is fundamentally grounded in relational, emotional, ethical, and advocacy-oriented care labour (Courtney & Hickey, 2016; Hewitt & Larson, 2007). The following areas -while not exhaustive- highlight several key dimensions of DSP practice that are critical to understanding the complexity of this role and its relevance to social work education.

Relational labour underpins DSP practice. DSPs build sustained, trust-based relationships with individuals with IDD, often over long periods of time, supporting everyday routines, community participation, and personal goals. This relational work requires attuning to individual communication styles, respecting individual preferences, and responding to changing needs (Idrees et al., 2025; Lutz & Fisher, 2023). DSPs frequently serve as consistent figures in the lives

of people who experience high staff turnover across service systems, making relational continuity a central albeit largely invisible component of quality support (Dickson, 2026; Friedman, 2025). Through these relationships, DSPs support autonomy and dignity within everyday relational work, while navigating organizational pressures shaped by broader institutional and policy constraints (Courtney & Hickey, 2016; Idrees et al., 2025).

Advocacy is a routine and essential part of DSP work. DSPs often act as intermediaries between individuals with IDD and larger service systems, including healthcare, housing, employment, and social services (Courtney & Hickey, 2016; Hewitt & Larson, 2007). This advocacy may involve ensuring that individuals' voices are heard in meetings, supporting decision-making, challenging restrictive practices, or resisting institutional routines that conflict with a person's rights or preferences (Idrees et al., 2025). However, not all DSPs understand advocacy as part of their role, and for some it may feel uncomfortable or risky to advocate within under-resourced and precarious service delivery systems. Advocacy is not always formalized or recognized within job descriptions, yet it is deeply embedded in daily practice and requires DSPs to navigate power dynamics, policy constraints, and ethical tensions.

DSPs engage in ongoing, sometimes even moment-to-moment decision-making within daily support work (Hewitt & Larson, 2007). These decisions often involve balancing individual choice and autonomy with considerations of safety, institutional policy, and resource limitations (Casey, 2011; Courtney & Hickey, 2016). DSPs must navigate ethical tensions around consent, risk, dignity, and control, often without clear guidance or authority (Hewitt & Larson, 2007). This ethical work is shaped by frontline realities rather than abstract policy, requiring DSPs to draw on practical wisdom, relational judgment, and reflective reasoning (Courtney & Hickey, 2016). As such, DSP practice constitutes a dynamic site of ethical learning that is directly relevant to social work values and professional competencies.

Despite the complexity and responsibility inherent in DSP roles, this work is frequently framed as unskilled and "entry-level" within social and health service hierarchies. As Hewitt & Larson (2007) note, this framing stands in stark contrast to the skill, judgment, and ethical accountability required in frontline disability support². DSPs are routinely tasked with managing crises, interpreting rights-based frameworks, advocating within bureaucratic systems, and sustaining emotionally demanding relationships, all while navigating institutional constraints that limit authority and recognition (Casey, 2011; Courtney & Hickey, 2016; Hewitt & Larson, 2007).

This tension between perceived skill level and actual practice demands exposes how care labour, particularly disability support work, is systematically undervalued (Armstrong, 2013; Casey, 2011). Labelling DSP work as entry-level not only obscures the professional knowledge it generates but also reinforces hierarchies that privilege certain credentialed expertise over relational, experiential, and practice-based knowing (Reinders, 2010). Our experiences challenge this framing by demonstrating that DSP work requires advanced competencies that closely align with, and often precede, formal social work training. In our frontline work, we gained knowledge and skills in rapport-building, crisis management, person-centered disability support, ethical and reflective practice, and systems navigation and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Entering social work education with our DSP experience involved moments of both recognition and invisibility. In some contexts, our DSP knowledge was validated when informing classroom

² See Armstrong (2013) for a robust discussion of the skills required to perform care work.

discussions, enriching peer learning, and grounding theoretical concepts in lived practice. In other moments, however, this knowledge was dismissed or treated as anecdotal, pre-professional, or irrelevant compared to “clinical” or academically sanctioned forms of expertise. Drawing on Miranda Fricker’s (2017) framework, these experiences can be understood as forms of epistemic injustice (p.1). At times, our credibility as knowers was downgraded, reflecting testimonial injustice rooted in assumptions about what constitutes legitimate expertise. At other times, the absence of shared conceptual frameworks to recognize and value DSP knowledge *reflects* hermeneutical injustice, wherein certain forms of experience remain insufficiently intelligible within dominant professional discourses.

Our experiences highlighted how professional education can inadvertently reproduce hierarchies of knowledge that marginalize care-based and disability-related expertise (Reinders, 2010). When DSP knowledge was unrecognized, it made visible the disconnect between social work’s stated commitments to inclusion and its curricular practices. On the contrary, when DSP experience was acknowledged, it demonstrated the potential for practice-based knowledge to deepen collective learning and challenge narrow conceptions of expertise.

The Dual Nature of DSP Work: Care, Control, and Power

While DSP work is commonly framed as supportive, relational, and person-centered, it also operates within institutional systems that rely on surveillance, regulation, and control (Shuttleworth, 2017). Engaging meaningfully with DSP practice, therefore, requires acknowledging its dual nature as work that can simultaneously enable care and reproduce constraint. Kelly and Chapman’s (2015) concept of “adversarial allies” offers a useful lens for understanding this tension (p. 47). Drawing on this concept, we understand frontline workers as occupying an inherently contradictory position in which they are tasked with supporting autonomy and well-being while also enforcing policies and practices that may limit choice and reinforce power imbalances.

In our DSP roles, our daily practice was shaped by unequal power relations embedded in institutional hierarchies. DSPs are positioned as both care providers and monitors, often responsible for upholding organizational rules related to safety, medication, finances, and daily routines (Shuttleworth, 2017). These responsibilities were further constrained by systemic factors such as chronic understaffing, restrictive funding models, and rigid policies that prioritized risk management and compliance over self-determination (Courtney & Hickey, 2016).

Disability service systems in Canada have long been shaped by paternalism, surveillance, and institutional control, and DSP roles are not exempt from these historical legacies. These institutional legacies are also inseparable from Canada’s colonial history, where practices framed as care have long been entangled with coercion, surveillance, and state control. These histories illuminate the contradictory position of frontline workers as “adversarial allies” (Kelly & Chapman, 2015), simultaneously tasked with supporting autonomy while upholding institutional practices shaped by risk, compliance, and control. As Chapman (2014) demonstrates in their account of restraining and confining disabled Indigenous children in a group home, practices framed as “care” have long been entangled with coercion, surveillance, and colonial violence within Canadian human service systems. Within these conditions, care and support were never value-neutral, as they were shaped by organizational expectations that framed certain behaviours as risky, non-compliant, or in need of correction.

While DSPs often strive to support autonomy and dignity, we also recognize that our roles can unintentionally reproduce ableist norms, institutional dependency, and forms of soft coercion embedded within disability service systems (Chapman, 2014). As Fook (2012) notes, critical reflection requires examining how assumptions about power shape everyday practice. Our experiences as DSPs illustrate how care and control are co-produced within institutional contexts, revealing the power dynamics embedded in seemingly routine decisions.

As we reflected together in preparation for writing this reflective paper, we often described encountering ethical tensions when supporting individuals' autonomy while simultaneously enforcing rules that limited choice. For example, supporting a person's desire to engage in community activities often requires navigating risk assessments that emphasize liability over lived experience, or enforcing curfews and routines that conflicted with individuals' preferences. These moments further highlighted how surveillance and control are frequently embedded within practices labelled as *care and support*, often producing moral distress and emotional strain for DSPs who are required to mediate these contradictions in daily practice (McCarron et al., 2022; Weinberg, 2009). Weinberg (2009) conceptualizes moral distress as arising from the gap between ethical intentions and what is possible within constrained organizational contexts (p. 149).

These tensions deepened our critical consciousness rather than diminishing our commitment to care. DSP work required an ongoing ethical commitment weighing safety against autonomy, institutional directives against relational commitments, and legal responsibility against respect for dignity, including the right to risk (Johnson & Traustadóttir, 2005). This ongoing negotiation prepared us to engage meaningfully with social work theory and ethics, not as abstract concepts, but as lived dilemmas shaped by power, context, and constraint. Importantly, these tensions reflect broader critical social work scholarship that shows how practices of care are historically embedded within systems of surveillance and control (Chapman & Withers, 2019).

Within social work education, DSP experience functioned as an early site of ethical and political learning. It fostered an understanding that harm and care can coexist within helping professions, and that ethical practice requires sustained reflexivity (Kelly & Chapman, 2015; Shuttleworth, 2017). Recognizing DSP work as a space where these contradictions are encountered and negotiated challenges simplistic narratives of care and stresses the necessity of acknowledging power, control, and resistance within everyday practice.

DSP Experience as a Resource for Peer Learning and Curriculum Gaps

Beyond shaping our individual learning, our frontline DSP experience served as a meaningful resource for peer learning in social work education, particularly in contexts where intellectual and developmental disabilities receive limited or inconsistent curricular attention (Eraut, 2004; McCann et al., 2023). Across our educational experiences, IDD was often absent or addressed only incidentally within broader discussions of diversity, leaving gaps in students' understanding of disability-related practice, care relationships, and service systems (John & Schrandt, 2019; Laws et al., 2010). This silence created space for experiential DSP knowledge to circulate informally within classrooms and peer interactions.

At various moments, DSP experience informed classroom discussions by grounding theoretical concepts in lived practice. Drawing on frontline examples allowed us to challenge assumptions

about dependency, risk, and autonomy, and to complicate idealized narratives of care that did not reflect institutional realities (Kelly & Chapman, 2015; Shuttlesworth, 2017). DSP knowledge also expanded case analyses by introducing relational and contextual dimensions often overlooked in formal instruction such as, how staffing levels, funding models, organizational policies, and burnout shape the quality of support that individuals receive (Casey, 2011; Courtney & Hickey, 2016; Hickey, 2014). Our contributions highlighted that care outcomes are not solely the result of individual practice choices but are deeply shaped by both structural and labour conditions.

Importantly, this form of peer learning was relational and reciprocal rather than expert-driven (Eraut, 2004; Walker & Gant, 2021). We did not position ourselves as authorities on IDD, but as contributors to a collective learning process informed by practice-based insight. In these exchanges, DSP experience acted as an informal curriculum, supplementing gaps in formal coursework and fostering more nuanced conversations about ethics, power, and responsibility in disability-related practice. At the same time, peer engagement allowed our assumptions to be questioned and refined through dialogue with classmates whose experiences and perspectives differed from ours (Walker & Gant, 2021).

These moments of informal knowledge sharing make visible the educational value of DSP perspectives within social work classrooms. When DSP experience was welcomed, it enriched collective understanding and widened the scope of critical inquiry. When it was dismissed or sidelined, it reinforced existing hierarchies of knowledge and limited opportunities for meaningful engagement with IDD, reflecting broader patterns of epistemic injustice in how experiential knowledge is recognized and mobilized in professional education contexts (Fricker, 2017). These experiences suggest that integrating IDD content and valuing practice-based knowledge within social work curricula are essential for preparing students to engage ethically and competently with disability across practice settings.

Reflecting on Knowledge, Limits, and Accountability

Affirming DSP experience as a meaningful site of social work learning also requires acknowledging the limits and risks embedded within frontline roles. DSP practice is shaped by institutional practices that can normalize restrictive routines, reinforce compliance, and position workers as complicit in systems that constrain autonomy, even when care is the intention (Kelly & Chapman, 2015). These tensions are intensified within under-resourced environments, where burnout, emotional fatigue, and structural constraints can narrow ethical possibilities and limit opportunities for critical reflection (Casey, 2011; Courtney & Hickey, 2016).

DSP experience alone does not provide the conceptual tools necessary to fully interrogate these dynamics. Social work education plays a critical role in naming power, situating individual practice within broader systems of oppression, and offering analytic frameworks for understanding disability justice, social policy, and institutional accountability (Hanes et al., 2022; Slayter et al., 2023). In this way, formal education provides the language and perspective needed to critically examine practices that may be normalized in everyday frontline work, stressing the importance of strengthening or centering, rather than sidelining, disability content within social work curricula.

Reflecting across our DSP and social work experiences stresses the importance of ongoing reflexivity (Walker & Gant, 2021; Weinberg, 2009). We do not position DSP knowledge as fixed

or as expertise, but as dynamic, partial, and continually evolving. Ethical practice requires sustained critical engagement, openness to challenge, and accountability to disabled people and communities (Hanes et al., 2022; Shuttleworth, 2017). Recognizing both the value and the limits of DSP knowledge allows it to be engaged responsibly, not as a substitute for formal education, but as a vital foundation for critically informed, relational, and accountable social work practice.

Conclusion

Towards a More Inclusive Social Work Education

This reflective paper has examined how our DSP experience functions as a foundational site of learning that shapes professional values, ethical awareness, and understandings of disability-related practice. Drawing on our experiences as current and former DSPs, we have shown that frontline disability support-work contributes to professional development, enriches peer learning, and offers critical insight into the relational and structural realities of IDD practice. By foregrounding DSP knowledge, we have also engaged with the tensions of care, power, and constraint embedded in frontline roles and considered how these experiences illuminate persistent gaps within social work education.

Following Fook's (2012) emphasis on linking personal experience to broader structural forces, we argue that DSP knowledge offers a critical lens for understanding disability, power, and institutional practice within social work education.

Our reflections echo the need expressed by others over the last several decades (e.g., Burge et al., 1999; John & Schrandt, 2019; Laws et al., 2010) for more explicit, sustained, and integrated inclusion of IDD content within accredited social work programs, alongside greater recognition of practice-based, relational, and care-centred forms of knowledge. Valuing DSP experience does not displace formal academic knowledge; it strengthens it by bringing situated, experiential insight into critical dialogue with theory, policy, and ethics.

We conclude by emphasizing both responsibility and possibility. DSP experiences can serve as bridges between practice, education, and advocacy, linking everyday care work to broader commitments to disability justice, ethical accountability, and inclusive professional education (Hanes et al., 2022; Shuttleworth, 2017). Advancing a more inclusive social work curriculum requires not only curricular reform, but sustained attention to whose knowledge is recognized, how it is valued, and how it is mobilized. Attending to these questions is essential to preparing social workers who can engage disability not as a peripheral topic, but as a central site of ethical, relational, and structural practice.

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Author Biographies

Anna Przednowek is an Assistant Professor of Social Work at Nipissing University. She is also an advocate for the inclusion of issues facing children, youth, and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and their families, in Social Work education in Canada. Anna worked as a direct support professional supporting young adults and seniors in residential care and direct funding support for over 13 years in Southern Ontario.

Teri-Lyn French is a fourth-year Bachelor of Social Work student at Nipissing University. Teri-Lyn has professional and lived experiences in Northern Ontario supporting and working with families and children with IDD during her career in early childhood education. She advocates on behalf of families and children to receive adequate and timely services to uphold a strong quality of life.

Kia Winger is a fourth-year Bachelor of Social Work student at Nipissing University. Kia has been working as a direct support professional with individuals with IDD in Northern Ontario for the past 4 years. Kia works with youth and families with complex mental health needs, supporting emotional regulation, distress tolerance and interpersonal effectiveness skills.

Key Messages

People with Intellectual and Developmental Disability: DSP perspectives inform social work education by highlighting what respectful, rights-based support looks like in everyday practice. Integrating these insights helps challenge assumptions and centres the voices, autonomy, and lived experiences of people with IDD.

Professionals: DSP experience brings critical, practice-based knowledge into social work education, deepening understanding of relational care, ethical tensions, and power. Engaging this knowledge strengthens reflective, disability-informed practice and challenges ableism within professional training.

Policy Makers: Social policies must ensure conditions that enable ethical, person-centered practice with individuals with IDD.

Social Work Education Policy Makers: Embedding DSP knowledge and experience in Canadian social work education hinges on the inclusion of disability-focused curricula.

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