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Using visual methodology: Social work student's perceptions of practice and the impact on practice educators.

Abstract

Practice learning within social work education plays a significant part in students' educational journey. Little is understood about the emotional climate of placements. This paper presents a small scale qualitative study of 13 social work students' perceptions of their relationship with a practice educator (PE) and 6 PE's perceptions of these emotional experiences. Visual methodology was employed over a two-phased research project, first social work students were asked to draw an image of what they thought practice education looked like, phase two used photo elicitation, PEs were then asked to explore the meaning of these images. Results demonstrated that social work students focused on their own professional discourse, the identity of PEs, power relationship and dynamics between themselves and PEs, the disjointed journey and practice education in its entirety. Whilst the PEs shared their personal views of practice education and reflected on this, both groups had a shared understanding of practice education including its values and frustrations.

Keywords: social work placements, visual methodology, practice educators

Introduction

There is a paucity of literature examining relationships within practice learning from a social work student perspective. Across health and social care professions students require professionals who will teach and assess knowledge and skills within practice. Recently research highlighted the impact of the mentoring relationship on student nurses, student mentors and lecturers delivering mentorship preparation programmes (Bailey-McHale, Bailey-McHale and Ridgway, 2016). Student nurses drew images depicting their placement mentors revealing polarised views, characterised as angels or demons. This study replicates that research with social work students.

Change has been a consistent feature of social work education in England for over fifteen years (Health and Care Professions council [HCPC] 2016). Statutory registration was introduced to social work in England in 2001; from 2003, only those on the General Social Care Council (GSCC) register could use the title Social Worker. In 2010, the government abolished the GSCC and from August 2012 the HCPC took over regulatory responsibility for Social Work in England. The HCPC incorporated responsibility for the monitoring and approving of social work programmes in England.

In addition to regulatory changes, social work education has had to respond to developments following the recommendations of the Social Work Reform Board

(disbanded 2013); including the introduction of professional standards known as the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) and changes to student selection. Changes to funding arrangements, the publication of several external reviews including Narey (2014) and Croisdale- Appleby (2014) and the wider uncertain context of higher education and social care, have all impacted on delivery of social work education in England (HCPC 2016). Further change is anticipated as the range of routes into social work is expanding and a new regulatory body imminent.

Within this developing context, in common with many professional health and social care qualifications, learning through practice has remained a crucial aspect of pre-qualifying social work education in England. Students spend 170 days on placement during their prequalifying programme. Domakin (2014) asserted that placements are an important feature of learning and have a bigger impact than classroom learning. Placements are frequently regarded as the signature pedagogy of social work education (Litvack, Bogo and Mishna 2010), however it remains an area where much is unknown and, it is claimed, neglected by higher education institutions (HEIs) (Trevithick 2012).

Most social work training programmes in England follow a standard pattern of two placements; 70 days for the first and 100 days for the final placement. Placements can be undertaken in a range of settings including Local Authority teams, voluntary, private and independent sectors (PVI). Placements are not always within a social work specific organisation however final placement students do need to undertake statutory social work tasks. Assessment of students on placement is made against the appropriate level of the PCF, which has nine domains covering the knowledge, skills and values needed to practice social work effectively. There are nine levels of the PCF, from entry onto training for social work up to strategic social worker level. The first four PCF levels cover social work students; entry level, readiness to practice, end of first placement and end of final placement. Assessment of students on both placements covers the same domains but is progressive in terms of the level of skills, values and knowledge the students need to achieve.

Social work placements in England are organised using a variety of models, but all students have a PE who is responsible for assessing their practice, supporting the student through placement and overseeing professional development (Basnett and Sheffield 2010). It can be argued that the role and responsibilities of PEs has been increasingly recognised and valued within the social work profession since the Reform Board Review. The PCF (BASW 2017) and the introduction of Practice Educator

Standards in October 2013 (BASW 2017b) can be seen as acknowledging the experience and knowledge needed to undertake this complicated role. Several studies demonstrate that PEs feel strongly that they have a role as ‘gatekeeper of the profession’ and struggle emotionally when they feel others, particularly universities, undermine this (Basnett and Sheffield 2010; Waterhouse et al 2011; Finch and Poletti 2014). PEs can view the role as having little status or reward. Research highlights that both onsite and off-site PEs find time to work with students limited by organisational and resource demands. PEs express guilt and anxiety about the impact on students. It may be a factor preventing many social workers from taking on the role (Domakin 2014; Domakin 2015; Crisp et al 2016). Litvack et al (2010) suggest that students are acutely aware of organisational issues/pressures and team dynamics whilst on placement and may be conscious that PEs do not have time for them.

In 2005 Lefevre examined student perceptions of relationships in practice learning, identifying complicated relationships between student and the PE. There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that the student / PE relationship is a key aspect of the placement experience, several studies suggested the PE relationship can be either a potential ‘risk’ or ‘protective’ factor for students trying to navigate the complexities of practice learning (Litvack, Bogo and Mishna 2010) and one that may have a significant impact on the enjoyment, learning and success of students. (Litvack, Bogo and Mishna 2010; Kanno and Koeske 2010; Cleak and Smith 2012; Bailey-McHale and Hart 2013; Finch and Poletti 2014). A student’s relationship with their PE can affect the placement experience and outcome (Barlow and Hall 2007, Domakin 2014; Crisp et al 2016). The impact of this has been identified as a factor in the experience of black and minority ethnic social work students who have higher placement fail rates and slower progression rates than their white colleagues (Fairtlough et al, 2014). Evidence therefore suggests that the student / PE relationship is highly significant, but multifaceted and complex and in need of further examination.

Acknowledging the significance of the PE/ student relationship, studies have considered the role emotions play within this dynamic. Several studies have identified

that strong emotions regarding placements and the PE / student relationship existed for both students and PE's. Students were generally anxious about placements and held emotional attachments and complicated feelings regarding their experiences and relationships (Lefevre 2005, Barlow and Hall 2007). Litvack et al's (2010) study of social work students established polarised views regarding their PEs; PEs were loved or hated by students indicating that there were power issues in the relationships. They noted that occasionally PEs were the primary source of stress for students and how complex relationships can become, describing examples of misuse of power, authoritative and punitive behaviours and inconsistent crossing of boundaries. These social work students were more likely to seek support from family and friends than PEs, tutors or peers when faced with placement difficulties.

Emotions and their impact are heightened when difficulties on placement are encountered (Finch and Poletti 2014; Basnett and Sheffield 2010; Finch, Schaub and Dalrymple 2014). Early research exploring emotions involved in the student / PE relationship focused on the role of the emotional response of the PE when failing students. This arose out of concerns across professional programmes, particularly nursing, that assessors were 'failing to fail' students (Duffy 2003). The impact of emotion on assessment has subsequently been further explored and several studies within social work have identified the significant impact both conscious and unconscious emotions can have on assessment of students who encounter difficulties whilst on placement (Finch and Poletti 2014, Basnett and Sheffield 2010). These studies found that the emotions of the PE decrease their ability to reflect rationally on a student's capabilities and that the emotional cost of the experience may make PEs reluctant to fail students (Finch, Schaub and Dalrymple 2014). It has been argued that students project their distress onto their PE (projective identification) causing intense emotional reactions in the PE, affecting their decision making and relationship with both the student and the university (Finch et al 2014b).

Supervision is regarded as essential for good social work practice and providing regular supervision to the student is a core PE task. The quality of this supervision is a major factor in student satisfaction with placements (Cleak and Smith 2012) and is important to the effective development of the students practice skills and professional identity (Zuchowski 2016). Supervision style and quality will likely impact on student

progression and development in several ways. Firstly, social work supervision is regarded as an essential tool to ensuring good practice. Mirroring can occur whereby the supervisee's relationship with their supervisor is reflected in their relationships with service users (Wonnacott 2012). Supervision is also an essential tool for ensuring the wellbeing of the student including supporting them to manage the emotional challenges of placement and developing their resilience. Furthermore, for social work students, supervision is regarded as an essential opportunity to make important links between practice in placement and theory taught in HEIs (Domakin 2014; Finch and Poletti 2014). Several studies have found that social work students reported a significant disjuncture between practice learning and university learning. This divide has been recognised over a number of years, Walton demonstrated that students viewed academic and practice learning as separate entities (cited in Domakin 2014). A major factor highlighted is the poor relationship with and involvement of universities in placements (Finch et al 2014; Basnett and Sheffield 2010; Domakin 2014). Some studies demonstrated a consistent level of dissatisfaction with HEI input. Despite the importance of practice learning, it has low status and limited attention placed on it by HEIs (Trevithick 2012). PEs felt isolated (Schaub and Dalrymple 2011), had a poor relationship with tutors and felt unsupported (Finch et al 2014; Basnett and Sheffield 2010). Many PEs and students held the view that tutors are out of date with social work practice (Domakin 2014). However, recognition is needed that this is a complex issue and no one size answer fits all (Waterhouse, McLagan and Murr 2011).

Methodological and Ethical considerations

This study embraced the interpretive tradition, whereby social and cultural processes are explored that allow the truth to emerge from engagement in the real world. This approach attempted to make sense of the relationship between the social work student and the PE in practice. Mixed methods were employed over a staged project approach. In stage one visual methodology (drawings) were used to explore social work students' perceptions of their relationship with a PE. In stage two a photo elicitation focus group of PEs were asked to discuss the students images in relation to their own experience and perceptions of practice education.

Visual research methods suggest that insight into society, or particular groups, can be gained by observation and analysis of visual matter (Banks & Zeitlyn 2015; Margolis & Pauwel 2011; Rose 2016). Drawings can therefore provide social and cultural

representations of a group, allowing the obtainment of detailed information that words cannot convey thus producing a discourse where symbolic significance and meaning is understood (Rose 2016; Spencer 2011). Photo elicitation is simply a participant produced image used as a prompt during an interview, this study applied the principle to drawings and a focus group.

Ethical approval was gained from the faculty ethics committee. The Economic and Social Research Council (2017) framework was considered and the research team promoted a culture of ethical reflection and learning throughout. Particular consideration was given to power, coercion, copyright and identification of poor practice. The notion of power was considered between the research team (faculty academics involved in the delivery and management of the social work programme) and the students and practice partners. It was made clear that participants were under no obligation to partake in the study and that care and respect between the parties would be upheld. A further consideration was copyright. Rose (2016) raised the issue of image ownership and that within copyright law this usually remains with the individual who produced the image, not the researcher. Therefore, consent and processes for dissemination needed to be made clear at the onset of the study and participants were made aware of the type of audience data would be shared with, thus consent was needed to reproduce and use the image. The principles of 'moral rights' was considered so that the images should not be shown in a negative or belittling manner (Wiles, Clark and Prosser 2011), and participants were made aware that if poor practice was identified this would be escalated.

The research aim was to:

Explore the impact on the social work student of the relationship in practice with the PE and understand the impact of these perceptions on the PE. From this two research questions arose,

- (1) How do social work students perceive their relationship with the PE?
- (2) What impact do the visual images created by social work students have on PEs?

A purposive sample for both stages of the study occurred. Both groups were emailed prior to data collection with a consent form and participant information leaflet, those wishing to participate in the research were asked to return the consent form prior to data collection.

In stage one a group of 20 third year social work students, who were undertaking their second and final placement, were recruited, of these 13 took part. 12 were female, one was male and all were aged between 20-47. They were asked to draw an image of their relationship with their PE, additional instructions to guide the activity were given, these were seen as prompts and have been used successfully in previous visual research to help start the process. It was suggested that the drawing may be a depiction of a PE, a relationship they had experienced, or an abstract thought about a PE. Once the drawing was completed they were asked to outline the meaning of the image.

In stage two, 34 practice educators were emailed and six female PEs agreed to attend the photo elicitation focus group, these were aged 30-60. The response rate was disappointing and the focus group may not truly represent all PEs, however those involved provided their own unique lens on practice education. The busyness of social work practice will undoubtedly have affected the participation rate, although we can not quantify this, it was a limitation of the current study. The PEs reviewed the drawings produced in stage one (each image had a unique identifier) and were asked four questions, first how the image made them feel, what it meant to them as a PE, what it said about the experience of learning in practice and finally what effect the image had on them as a PE. At this stage the written outline describing the meaning of the drawing was not available for the PE to review, this avoided potential bias. The photo elicitation focus group was audio recorded.

The drawings were thematically analysed using Rose's (2016) writings on discourse analysis. First the drawings were explored by the visual appeal and meaning, here the researchers needed to suspend their pre existing suppositions. The images were provisionally themed into groups. Secondly a written narrative of each image was undertaken, themes were reorganised leading to the final phase where critical exploration of the themes occurred. During the final phase the photo elicitation transcript was added and informed the visual thematic analysis.

A basic thematic analysis was applied to the photo elicitation transcript, the discussion was transcribed verbatim, data was explored to identify initial themes. Thirdly a thematic grouping of the data occurred and finally the themed data were organised to demonstrate the themes and allow example extracts to be used. Triangulation of thematic findings was achieved through the combined use of the visual and verbal data (Denscombe, 2017).

Results

Phase one

Five themes were identified, these were professional discourse; practice educator/social worker identity; power; disjointed journey and practice education.

Professional discourse

The imagery related to ideas about what constituted professional knowledge. Several students included drawings depicting knowledge with an emphasis on legal knowledge. The facilitation of this learning was viewed as an important aspect of the role of the PE by the students. However, a significant aspect of this learning was associated with theory and books and appeared to be somewhat disconnected from practice. This disconnectedness could be exaggerated by the facilitation approach of the PE. Learning in practice did not appear in relation to the service user, indeed the service user is invisible in all drawings and mentioned only once in a commentary. Ideas in relation to oppression and anti-discriminatory practice were evident in a small number of drawings, however this was mainly viewed in relation to the practice of the PE rather than a significant aspect of social work practice. A recurring feature within this theme was a lack of 'heart' within practice; an emphasis on brains over heart, thinking over feelings. The strong emotional component was discussed in relation to the impact of the PE on the social work student rather than the experience of service users. The invisibility of service users in the students' drawings and commentary is concerning. We do not know why this was the case, but it raises several questions warranting further enquiry. It may be that such pressure is placed on students whilst on placement that they focus chiefly on their own needs and emotional responses, potentially to the detriment of service users. Furthermore, the disjointed nature of the student journey may impact on the student's ability to recognise the centrality of the service user in theory and practice. This invisibility may present an issue in future social work practice.

Practice Educator identity

The iconography surrounding the identity of the PE was powerful both in the depiction of the PE and the artefacts used to create that picture. There are numerous images reflecting a similar stereotypical picture of the PE. In those images where gender can be deduced the PE is portrayed as female. This will undoubtedly reflect the nature of the PE workforce however the details in these drawings were interesting. Participant 11 is a good example of the type of image portrayed.

Insert figure 1

The PE is largely viewed as female, white, older and middle class. The student explained that the PE is knowledgeable and experienced but could be out of touch with the realities of social work practice. Other characteristics such as clothing, jewellery and hairstyle emphasised this perception. Participant three described the PE as 'old and grumpy'. All the depicted PEs were white. The lack of BME PEs is thought to be a factor in the higher failure rate of BME students on placement compared to their white counterparts (Fairtlough et al 2014). This is increasingly recognised in social work education, although action to address it seems slow. The current lack of diversity amongst PEs may also promote an inaccurate perception amongst social work students, that experienced and knowledgeable social workers are white.

A further striking impression was that of a busy, distracted PE who had limited time for the student. In addition to 'old and grumpy' participant three highlighted 'travel and rushed'; 'late' and 'messy and disorganised'. Participant 13 described the difference in the quality of organised supervision times and general practice time

Practice educators are friendly and informative during planned time (supervision) but are distant/busy in times out of this.

These impressions warrant further enquiry. The factors identified by students seem likely to impact on the quality of supervision provided, but also on the confidence of students in their PE to provide guidance when needed. Students are required to ask for help when needed during placement (HCPC 2016b). Furthermore, the comments suggest that PEs may be failing to recognise their responsibilities as role models in developing the student's professional behaviour.

Power

Many images gave a strong sense of the power dynamics felt during the PE / student relationship. This could be seen in the size of the student in some drawings.

Insert figure 2

Invariably the student was portrayed as much smaller than the PE, this was evident even in the drawings that described a positive relationship. Participant 10 referred to the PE as knowledgeable and experienced but felt scared and judged, in this image the student is invisible. The student is often portrayed as infantile suggesting a sense of powerlessness. Several images depicted a PE who was questioning and critical of the student, some students viewed this as encouraging critical thinking whilst others were left feeling judged. Participant 16 said about her PE

I always hated meeting them, they quizzed you all the time, made me feel like I was in school.

The sense of being judged was strong from some participants, it is interesting that the word assessed was not chosen in any of the commentaries or images. The judgement clearly provoked anxiety and fear for some. The link to assessment, although implicit could be seen in the imagery and description of some students when they refer to feedback, this was viewed positively by students. There were some positive perceptions of power, participant 12 described the changing PE / student relationship as practice experience developed and the PE could “step back and the student becomes more independent.” However, the overriding perception is one of a powerless student feeling judged. Whilst it is the reality of practice placements that students are being scrutinised and their practice examined, this should be undertaken in a way that encourages learning and development. This requires skilful PEs, who gain experience and knowledge over time to balance the responsibilities of their role. It would be useful to explore further the level of experience of PEs, ongoing training and development provided and whether this affects the student’s perception of power.

Disjointed journey

A linear, developmental journey was not portrayed in the depictions of practice learning. The consensus was of a disjointed journey through the practice elements of the programme. This was seen in the differences between statutory and non-statutory placements. The participants presented a polarised perception of the statutory and non-statutory placements. The non-statutory placement was described as nurturing and offering an ideological representation of what social work practice should be e.g. inclusive and anti-oppressive with sufficient time to do the job well. Whereas the statutory placement was depicted by some as chaotic, oppressive and unsupportive. Participant seven offered the most vivid description of this difference. She described the first non-statutory placement as “exactly what it should be, passion and love for service users and social work.” This is the only reference to service users in any student contribution. In contrast, the statutory placement is accompanied with an unhappy face with words such as “oppressive”; “unapproachable”; “feel in the way”. The reasons for the differences between statutory and non-statutory placements are likely to be complicated, reflecting many factors. One hypothesis is the organisations tend to hold different perceptions of students on placement; PVI placements may be more aware of the reciprocal nature of a student placement, appreciating the much-needed funding

associated with the student as well as work undertaken. The statutory sector, conscious of their responsibilities including the need to complete work within set timescales, may find supporting and teaching students an unwelcome additional activity. Finding ways of encouraging all social workers to regard training future social workers as their responsibility could begin to address this.

Several participants also mentioned the difference in having an onsite PE and an external PE. Some of the issues discussed above in relation to the theory / practice gap seem more evident with offsite PEs. Some students referred to imagery connected to journeys such as tunnels and rainbows however when a sense of movement between placements was suggested it tended to be drawn in a compartmentalised fashion rather than a series of linked practice experiences.

Practice education

It is possible to gather a general sense of practice learning from the drawings and comments of the participants. There were examples of good facilitation and support by PEs. These commentaries tended to emphasise knowledge and practice experience combined with an inclusive and open approach. Where students described positive experiences, the PE demonstrated a passion for social work and a passion for sharing knowledge and experience with the student.

Insert figure 3

Participant 14 drew a handshake explaining that it symbolised “strength, solidarity and partnership.” In contrast, negative experiences of practice education were depicted as having a strong, negative emotional impact on the student. The experience was perceived as anxiety provoking, fearful and at its most extreme oppressive.

Phase two

The PEs shared their reactions to the images and these were organised into three themes: PE view of practice education, shared view of placement types and PE reflections.

PE view of practice education

The PEs expressed idealised views of the relationship between a PE and student. At times, they were disappointed with the perceived lack of understanding from the students about what happens within this relationship. The role of assessment was particularly important to the PEs as was the required objectivity and challenge involved in this. There was a discomfort with the perceived power imbalance between the PE

and student however this was viewed as inevitable within an assessment context, participant six explained

It reminds me that actually anxiety sort of underlies an enormous amount of interaction between anybody who's the helper and the helped or the guider and the guided.

The PEs discussed the contractual nature of their relationship as an important means by which power imbalances were mitigated. Interestingly the reaction to an image that suggested an equal relationship caused some worry as this was viewed as an immature understanding of that relationship. The PEs were concerned by the lack of involvement of the rest of the placement team in the facilitation of learning. An emphasis on the need for objectivity was strong from the PEs and when a student suggested 'love' for their PE it was widely discussed as being inappropriate. A final interesting contrast between the two sets of views was the concept of busyness. The students were conscious of busy PEs who sometimes appeared to lack time and attention. The PEs felt this lacked empathy regarding the difficult role of the PE. However, the PEs did not comment on the appropriateness of burdening the student with these difficulties nor did they discuss the need to escalate their concerns within their organisation.

Shared view of placement types

This theme centred on the differences and similarities of the statutory and non-statutory placements. Some students expressed frustration with statutory placements and the PEs could understand this view. They too were aware of the constraints of busy statutory placements and how students could potentially be viewed as a hindrance.

Participant three explained

I think there is a recognition that in statutory these days, as everywhere else, teams have been cut back so much and I think taking a student can be more of a pressure than a pleasure.

There was an agreement between PEs and students that non-statutory placements were at the heart of good social work practice.

PE reflections

There was a shared sadness at the volume of negative experiences from practice and the perceived lack of understanding of the role of PEs. Some PEs discussed their approach to facilitation and how they attempted to manage the experience. The lack of

team involvement with the student was commented on by some PEs and this was viewed as something they should endeavour to improve. Participant 6 described her experience

I don't know if some practitioners feel like they're the only point of contact. I've had a really great experience this time round, one of my team have taken this person under their wings . . . that load has lightened for me and actually enriched the person's experience.

There was a consensus that the images suggested PEs needed to consider how they managed the expectations of students in practice and particularly what the student could expect from the PE as part of a contractual relationship.

Discussion

Although a small study at one English HEI, we found persistent challenges continuing to impact negatively on social work student placements and learning. This includes the disjointed experience for students of academic learning and practice learning, the inconsistent recognition and valuing of learning from service users/carers (experts by experience) and the impact of the relationship between student/PE, including the location of significant power within that one relationship in the placement. The results of this project highlighted, and this discussion will concentrate upon, the high emotional impact of practice learning for both students and PEs and identified how diverse and complicated the experience can be. We acknowledge this reflects the reality of practice, but the impact of this on learning and assessment needs consideration as we move to more work-based models of training.

When the social work degree was introduced in England in 2003, practice learning was placed at the centre of social work education. It can be argued that current developments in pre-qualifying social work education in England, including the Integrated Degree Apprenticeship programme and Social Work Teaching Partnerships emphasise practice learning over academic learning. Yet it is clear that the relationship between practice experience and student learning requires further exploration.

Our research confirmed that the student/PE relationship remains highly significant, but it is not one either the student or university has much control over. Lefevre (2005) identified that the relationship between student and PE is crucial for the effective delivery of practice learning. She argued that this relationship needs to be an open, collaborative partnership and offer a supportive nurturing approach. We note that although some students in this project described a collaborative relationship with their PE, many did not, they described a power imbalance and feelings of oppression. As experienced social workers, PEs are expected to “Demonstrate and model the effective and positive use of power and authority, whilst recognising and providing guidance to others as to how it may be used oppressively” (BASW 2017). Our research findings suggest that PEs are not consistently managing this within their student relationships. We would argue that PEs need to recognise and be aware of the power differentials in this relationship, explore and appreciate the students social identity and location and how it differs from theirs, the student’s personal biography and practice reflexively to recognise how values, social difference and power are affecting their relationship and assessment. Our finding suggest that PE training and development is not yet consistently ensuring PEs achieve this and HEIs need to examine how to address this as a matter of priority. It not only affects the student on placement, but given the impact of mirroring within the supervision relationship, is significant in teaching the student effective ways of practising in an anti-oppressive manner.

Experiences on placement can trigger strong emotional responses in students, including childhood experiences but also bereavements, relationship breakdowns and personal experience of social work involvement. None of our participants referred to this occurring for them, but the sample is small; a larger study may identify how students cope with this and the level of support they get from their PE and others involved in the placement. It is pertinent to question whether HEIs could prepare students for the differences they may encounter in differing placement settings. Furthermore whether HEIs support students sufficiently to manage difficult emotions that may be triggered when on placement.

The work of Mezirow (Mezirow and Taylor 2009) has explored the ways in which highly emotional experiences can be used to initiate transformative learning opportunities. Mezirow argued that transformative learning is characterised by considerable changes in habits of mind that allow the learner to question taken for

granted assumptions about the world. The lack of attention to the very real emotional journey of the social work student would suggest that PEs may be missing opportunities to facilitate this type of deep learning.

The study reported an acute awareness of the high emotional burden in practice. In some cases, the stress for the student associated with practice learning was connected to the role of the PE and the nature of the placement, particularly whether the placement was statutory or non-statutory. The impact of differing environments and relationships within statutory placements and non-statutory placements is an area needing further exploration. Our findings raised questions relating to the learning achieved in different settings which is perhaps not surprising considering the relationship between emotions and the ability to learn. Within our study, we found that both students and PEs valued non-statutory placements regarding them as embodying social work values. However, we acknowledge that generally within social work, statutory placements are regarded as a superior learning experience. The future of non-statutory placements is uncertain. Social Work Teaching Partnerships, established following social work education reviews by Croisedale-Appleby (2014) and Narey (2014) aim to improve the education of social work students not least by increasing statutory placement provision. Our project, whilst a small sample, may question this approach. We would argue it does suggest that HEIs need to consider the preparation and support they provide to both students and PEs in relation to work placements. Current HEI student/PE allocation processes may pay insufficient attention to relationships and opportunities for learning. Furthermore, HEIs may need to review their support for students on placement. Rather than a generic approach it may be that flexible, individualised support from tutors, acknowledging differing sectors, experiences and relationships may be more appropriate.

Another strong and relevant finding within our study was the stereotypical image of the PE as white, female, middle aged and middle class. This was an image that some students clearly felt distanced them from their PE. Skills for Care (2016) reported an increase in the number of under 24-year olds in social work pre-qualifying programmes, this age group now makes up 41% of the student social work population. Although not the experience of all students a lack of diverse role models was an issue for some. This may also be an issue with other underrepresented groups within social work and a factor

in comparably high failure rates for BME and male students. This is a complex area; HEIs do need to work with placement organisers to encourage a more diverse population of PEs and consider more specific matching of student and PE. This is not new information but progress is still needed. The ways in which students can be better supported in placements when their social identity is significantly different to that of most people within the placement needs further exploration; the development of a range of models will probably be required. HEIs may also need to challenge assumptions of some students including possibly ageist preconceptions.

Our research found that for some students, the way the PE worked was problematic. They presented consistent images of PEs being rushed and disorganised. In the PE focus group this caused some annoyance at the lack of awareness of the pressures of the role. PEs viewed the criticisms by students as unfair. Students may have limited understanding of structural issues at play in social work education and take a highly individualistic approach to their analysis of their PE. This may be understandable but given their planned career as social workers, it may be appropriate to encourage students to identify wider cultural and structural factors impacting on their experiences. The PE focus group did have some awareness that student perceptions needed to be reflected on further and addressed.

The role of the PE is a complex and responsible position. Improving the status of this role is needed. Practice Educator Professional Standards (PEPS) came into effect in October 2013. However, the demise of The College of Social Work subsequently has left the practice educator standards in some confusion. The HCPC regulator consider university PE quality on an individual basis, rather than using PEPS as a benchmark (HCPC 2016). We also acknowledge that payment and funding of Practice Education, alongside uncertain contractual arrangements, all impact on the role and may play a part in affecting quality and availability of PEs. The results from our study revealed a number of areas of concern regarding practice learning and the PE role, the potential for less training for this challenging task should be of concern to the profession.

Limitations and areas for further research

This was a small study in one university in the North West of England, caution is needed in the application of these findings due to the size of the sample and the variation of PE

standards across the UK and wider audiences. There were some limitations in that some of the team were known to participants and the number of PEs involved in the focus group could have been greater. However, the results replicated other studies and highlighted the challenges apparent both in facilitating learning in the practice setting for social work students and potentially for all health and social care students. We have noted several areas for further research which should prioritise exploration of practice learning and identify strategies that address the emotional impact of that learning.

Conclusion

Social work practice and education continues to be the focus of much debate, a priority for the new regulator when established should be a review of practice learning and the requirements necessary for supporting students. PEs and social work students should reflect on the emotional intensity of their relationship and the requisite skills required to effectively manage this relationship. HEIs need to examine their practice and preparation of both students and PEs for this complex situation. In addition, PEs, employers, stakeholders and the social work profession need to create a renewed focus on celebrating the vital work of the PE and ensuring that the role receives the recognition it deserves.

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