An exploration of issues affecting the assessment of social work students on practice placement in England

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Abstract;

This article explores issues affecting assessment of social work students on practice

placements in England. The authors have many years of experience in this area of

social work and aim to highlight concerns about the complexity of assessment in

practice settings. This report draws on research presented by Bailey-McHale and

Caffrey (2018) at the 12th International Conference on Practice Teaching and Field

Education in Health and Social Work in order to consider student perspectives. These

highlight a sense of feeling powerless and judged. This article also explores the wider

issues potentially impacting on the assessment of students practice. Acknowledging

the challenges of all assessments, we consider how assessment of student practice

may be further complicated by factors including the role and demands of universities,

the impact of training and support for practice educators and pressures within current

social work practice. This commentary highlights longstanding inequalities within

social work assessment on placements for some student groups, including BAME

students. The authors draw on Brookfield's (1998) reflective lenses and encourage the

social work profession to reflect and consider how current practice might be improved.

The authors invite ideas and feedback to stimulate a professional debate and new

ideas.

Key words; practice learning; assessment model; social work students; practice educator;

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<u>Introduction</u>

The aim of this article is to explore issues affecting assessment of social work (SW) students on placement in England, and commence a critically reflective debate within the profession to improve upon current practice. The authors have over 30 years' experience working as practice educators, tutors and placement coordinators with SW students on placement in the north-west of England. Thus, are immersed in the world of Practice Learning, and passionate about its merits. However, they are aware "...reviews into social work in particular and the international research across professions in general highlight persistent concerns and complexities associated with practice learning and assessment" (Finch 2017 p11). We suggest current SW education and practice in England is adding further pressures to pre-existing difficulties.

The authors were prompted to explore assessment of students in practice after undertaking research into students' perceptions of their practice learning experiences (Bailey-McHale, Bailey-McHale, author and Ridgway 2018). The project, which also gathered Practice Educators responses to the students' perceptions, was presented at the 12th International Conference on Practice Teaching and Field Education in Health and Social Work, September 2018, is discussed further below. The research project provided a transformational learning experience (Meizrow 2000), prompting us to critically reflect on our assumptions about assessment of student practice. Brookfield (1998) proposes a critically reflective practitioner needs to stand outside her/his practice and see what she/he does from a wider perspective. He proposes looking at practice through four complementary lenses to achieve this. Underpinning this article are three of these; the lens of our own experiences as reflective learners, the lens of learners' eyes, and the lens of theoretical and research literature.

We encourage the SW profession, especially those in practice learning, to consider using imaginative speculation and reflective scepticism (Brookfield 1998) to reflect upon current practice. This would bring the fourth lens, that of colleague's perceptions, to the discussion. Brookfield noted; "Although critical reflection often begins alone, it is, ultimately, a collective endeavour. We need colleagues to help us know what our assumptions are and to help us change the structures of power so that democratic actions and values are rewarded within, and without, our institutions. (1998 p 200)

Assessing SW students on placement in England;

Despite frequent changes in the delivery of higher education and social work programmes in England, placements remain "the defining feature of social work training" (Litvack, Bogo, and Mishna 2010). Students must pass their placements to qualify and register as a social worker. Domakin (2014) asserts learning gained on placement has a higher impact on students than classroom learning. Government, employers and the professions' belief in the criticality of practice learning is reflected in current developments in SW training in England, including Social Work Teaching Partnerships between Universities and their placement providers.

Organisation, timing and structure of SW student placements vary, but all SW students on placement have a practice educator (PE) who assesses their practice. The role of PE is undertaken by a qualified social worker who has undergone further training and meets the required standards as set out in the Practice Educator Professional Standards for Social Work (PEPS), (TCSW 2013). Responsibilities of the PE include assessment, support and overseeing opportunities for students' professional development (Basnett and Sheffield 2010, Finch and Poletti 2013, Watson and West 2003).

PE's are typically hardworking and committed. They voluntarily take on the role with little personal reward for a demanding task which contributes to the professions' future and maintains professional standards. However, we should not ignore aspects of the role and task which may affect assessment of students. The role incorporates multiple functions noted above, which can conflict; PE's are frequently a main source of support for students but also their assessor. Relationships can be intense and complicate assessment (Basnett and Sheffield 2010). PE's may emphasise different aspects of their role, creating very dissimilar experiences for students.

Benchmarks and frameworks to assess SW students' practice have changed with regulators and reviews. The National Occupational Standards were replaced by the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) in England in 2013 and the PCF was subsequently revised in 2018. The role of Practice Educator, has not. This has remained fundamentally the same for decades. As Hackett and Marsland noted twenty years ago PE's are given "almost exclusive power in the responsibility they have for assessing the student's competency" (1997 p44).

Student perspective of practice learning

In examining the assessment of students on placement the view of students needs to be considered. At the 12th International Conference on Practice Teaching and Field Education in Health and Social Work, September 2018, one author of this article and a colleague delivered the presentation; **Using visual methodology: Social work student's perceptions of practice and the impact on practice educators.** (Bailey -Mchale and Caffrey 2018). This shared the findings from a small - scale research project undertaken in the north west of England in which a final year cohort of social work students drew images of their practice educators. The images were subsequently

shared with practice educators in a focus group discussion. (Bailey-McHale et al 2018).

The use of visual methodology is well established within social sciences, but less common in social work (Clark and Morriss 2017). It allows exploration of sensitive topics, providing new insight; Rose (2016) argues images can provide a story without words — even beyond words. Obtaining genuine feedback from students on their placements is difficult; they are understandably cautious. Yet to better understand their experience of practice education, we need to find the student lens which may "reflect back to us a stark and differently highlighted picture of who we are and what we do" (Brookfield 1998 p197) The students drawing their perspectives enabled this.

They evidence an acute awareness by students of complexities to be navigated in their PE relationship and practice learning environment. A few of the images are included here;

Image 1 to be inserted about here

Image 2 alongside about here

Image 3 to be inserted below the other two about here

Many of the drawings include a representation of power dynamics in the PE/student relationship. Some portrayed the student as much smaller than the PE, even when the drawing described a positive relationship. The student was frequently portrayed as infantile suggesting a sense of powerlessness and several images depicted a

questioning, critical PE. Significantly students referred to "feeling judged"; none to being assessed. This provoked anxiety and fear. There were positive perceptions of power; but the overriding impression is one of powerless students feeling judged. Finch (2017) argues this emotional aspect of the student/PE relationship makes assessment in practice uniquely difficult.

PEs' responses to the images included shock, then denial that it reflected them. With deeper reflection, they acknowledged that applying the students' lens had provided a challenging picture of practice learning and further discussion was needed to explore possible changes in practice.

Image 4 to be inserted about here

Assessment of SW students' practice

SW students practice on placement is assessed using the appropriate level of the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF). This has recently been 'refreshed' by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), a professional association with no regulatory powers (BASW, 2018b). However, the landscape is crowded in assessment criteria for students in England. Social workers and students are additionally obliged to meet the Standards of Proficiency in social work (SOPs) set by the Health Care Professionals Councils (HCPC) current regulators of the profession.

The separation of adult and children's social work departments in England has given rise to separate social work post-qualifying standards, Knowledge and Skills Statements (KSS) for adult and children's social work (Department for Education, 2018, Department for Health, 2015). Although the KSS ostensibly applies to qualified workers, the authors note recent expectations by employers, as well as respondents to a BASW survey updating the PEPS, (BASW, 2018) for students and programmes

to demonstrate KSS standards before qualifying. Consequently, layers of professional standards (PCF, SOPs, KSS), are mapped against each other. This could be confusing for students and Practice Educators to integrate and assess against.

Furthermore, what constitutes good social work is a contested issue across agencies and PE's, complicating the inherent subjective element to all assessment. Universities manage academic assessment using anonymous marking, clear marking criteria, second markers and external examiner scrutiny. On placement the risk of biases, conscious and unconscious, are harder to control and subjectivity may be a greater issue. We recently held a focus group with university tutors looking at the students' images. One commented "I still think there is a lot of subjectivity in the assessment which ...comes back to that original point about relationships and I think ...if the practice educator and the student like each other and get on, that subjectivity definitely influences and infiltrates the assessment" (Caffrey, Bailey-McHale, Ridgway, Bailey-McHale and Fruin 2018)

Despite the complexity and potential pitfalls, assessing students practice involves Universities delegating this task to others, often providing minor support and retaining little control. Students not at the required standard need to fail. However, the authors have occasionally experienced PE's failing to provide adequate supervision or opportunities to students they "fail". The personal and financial cost to a SW student failing a placement is substantial. Universities need to ensure accuracy, transparency and fairness of assessment.

University role and issues;

The main link between placement and University for a SW student on placement is the tutor. Tutors usually visit placements twice, to complete a contract before the start of

placement and midway to review student progress. They additionally attend should difficulties arise. Research regarding the tutor role is sparse but nonetheless consistently documents tutors concerns about their role in placements. (Collins et al 1999, Watson and West 2003, Finch 2015). Tutors hold multiple conflicting roles, including supporting student and PE simultaneously. Tutors report feeling powerless, unsupported and untrained to manage the complexities of issues on placement including conflict between students and PE's and failing students (Watson and West 2003, Finch 2017).

Significant organisational pressures in English Universities may further impact the assessment and experience of placements. The introduction of the social work degree in 2003 in the UK allowed students from eighteen years of age to apply; previously students were required to have substantial work experience. Widening participation in degree programmes has enabled many strong social workers to qualify who would have been formerly disadvantaged. However, some have questioned whether "the degree is churning out graduate social workers who lack the life experience of their predecessors, most of whom joined the profession in their thirties" (Williams, 2009).

This assertion merits discussion in terms of changing needs and expectations of students, who may require greater support. With the advent of University degree tuition fees in 1998 in England, indebting students, particularly those from overseas who are charged more than UK nationals, and subsequent pressure on Universities to deliver higher quality programmes and rising student expectations has affected the dynamic between student, tutor, and Practice Educator. Students evaluate their University degree programmes in England via the National Student Survey (NSS) which nationally ranks programmes: Programmes deemed poor by students are targeted by University managers to improve, as rankings impact on applications and sustainability

of programmes. Cleary (2018, p.1) notes the "influence of market forces on the academic–student relationship, on processes of student admissions, assessment and specifically academic decision making with regard to failing students". This latter point resonates in terms of whether undue influences to pass students who should fail are now increased.

SW student placements are being delivered in a world where "Fiscal and managerial pressures, increased student numbers, the expectations of students as fee-paying consumers of education and fierce competition between higher education providers to attract students, are all providing a constant challenge to ensure that students receive a quality learning experience." (Cleak and Zuchowski 2018 p23) Although many involved in SW education have not welcomed the culture of managerialism, it may become the force creating motivation to change and provide a more robust model of assessment.

Placement Setting/Availability

In England we employ a "grace and favour model" of placement allocation. (Fairtclough 2014) in which universities rely on persuading partners, including Local Authorities and agencies in the voluntary and private sectors, to provide student placements. In some areas of the country this is more difficult as student numbers are high making placement opportunities highly sought after. This might cause reluctance to challenge placement providers. A tutor at our focus group commented; "if there is a problem on the side of the practice educator how do you tackle that as a tutor? I feel (like) this might mess up future placement opportunities and I just find it really stressful looking at that picture and knowing students in those situations. As a tutor that feels horrible." (Caffrey et al, 2018)

Placement setting, and organisation of student support and assessment within it, varies. Little is known about the impact of these differences on student assessment. Universities often place first level students in a non-statutory (PVI) placement, with an off-site Practice Educator, and a final placement, usually a Local Authority statutory social work department, with an on-site PE. The onsite/offsite models of social work placement supervision and assessment have been debated internationally in terms of practicality, objectivity, and quality, (Maidment & Woodwood 2002, Zuchowski, 2015) and merit further exploration.

Students and employers can perceive PVI placements as less worthy despite the plethora of opportunities that they offer (Tulloch, 2011). Recent UK government financial incentives encourage the formation of Social Work Teaching Partnerships (SWTPs) between local social work departments and Universities in England, in a bid to, it is claimed, improve social work education by reducing non-statutory placements in favour of statutory ones (Department for Education, 2016). Curtailing students' experience of the diversity and innovation of, PVI agencies, who ironically are often commissioned to undertake work the statutory sector is unable to do, would be a seismic shift in social work education in England. It could reduce the opportunity to assess students in a sector where they could thrive.

Furthermore, organisational challenges within statutory agencies may impact student assessment. Triggered by a policy of austerity from 2010 across public services in the UK (Hastings, Bailey, Bramley, Gannon and Watkins, 2015) frequent reorganisations of agencies to reduce costs, have in turn reduced and destabilised established practice educators and placements, with staff required to 'hot desk' or 'agile work' (Wheeler, 2017). Social workers are required to use mobile devices to record and communicate rather than have an allocated work base. Additionally, social work teams

unable to retain permanent staff, employ agency or temporary staff. This unstable context, together with frequent policy changes, a lack of resources for staff and service users, high expectations from the public and government, and a culture of defensiveness in UK social work due to media and political scrutiny, has created placement contexts in England that can be overwhelming rather than nurturing for students and those assessing them.

The challenges of these organisational contexts are exacerbated by the aims of inclusivity and diversity juxtaposed with the reality for students with additional needs including learning disabilities such as dyslexia and BAME students, who have long since experienced inequalities within assessment in practice.

Training and Standards of PE

Practice Educators in England must be qualified social workers, with a minimum of two to three years' experience (TCSW 2013). Aside from registering as a social worker with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), there is no regional or national body in England for Practice Educators to register with, potentially make it difficult to challenge poor practice by a Practice Educator.

The current framework of PEPS for trainee Practice Educators in England has not been effectively regulated since its' launch in 2013. The body that introduced PEPS, The College of Social Work (TCSW), closed in 2015 after only four years when government funding ceased (McNicoll and Schraer, 2015). PEPS are currently under review.

In our experience, some candidates on PE training programmes identify completing the PE training to attain a career progression point rather than committing to the ongoing support of students. Furthermore, employer mentorship of trainee Practice Educators varies substantially, and impact on Practice Educator confidence and competence, and inevitably, student assessment outcomes.

Practice educators undertake the formal assessment of students on placement. Yet their training, assessment and support differ according to local programmes and employer arrangements. This will impact on standards of assessment.

<u>Inequalities in the assessment of students on placement</u>

Inequalities in the assessment of some groups of SW students on placement has been evident for years. Data from SW courses between 1995 – 1998 showed "Students' personal characteristics, such as their gender or ethnicity significantly altered the probability that they would not achieve a social work qualification or that their progression would be delayed, by for instance, needing to repeat a piece of course work or practice placement" (Hussien et al 2009 p7)

Masocha (2015) argues race and racism remain "salient determining factors in the experience of Black students within social work education" (p636). In 2003 – 7 students from BAME groups constituted 26 – 30% of social work students on prequalifying SW degree programmes, they experienced higher failure rates on placement than their white counterparts and slower progression (Fairtlough et al, 2014). The proportion of BAME students enrolled on SW courses has grown since this time partly due to the widening participation agenda. Yet social work education providers have failed to adjust to the needs of BAME students who remain inadequately supported in practice settings in England. (McCaughan et al 2018). Factors causing this are wide ranging. However, racism on placement including subtle micro aggressions, have been shown to play a significant role (Masocha 2015,

Fairtclough et al 2014). Students experiencing this may be left feeling inadequate, frustrated and isolated impacting far beyond the placement experience.

SW students with a wide range of disabilities are likewise disadvantaged on placements; In 2016/17, 17% of people enrolling considered themselves to have a disability and this proportion has risen from 14% of enrolments in 2011/12. (Skills for Care 2018). Students may receive support in University, including additional time for academic assessments, but this may not transfer to placements. Students with a disability on placement, unlike employees, have no automatic right to reasonable adjustments. Negotiating individual support needs can be problematic, cause delays starting placement and consequently in completing the course. This may encourage students to "hide" or "minimise" their needs disadvantaging their assessment. PE's may not be trained to address this and, in an environment, where managers are requesting students "that can hit the ground running", assessment may be affected.

Given the evidence of inequalities in student assessment in practice, maybe an assessment system giving "almost excusive power" to one person needs reexamining.

Conclusion

Challenging long established, deeply entrenched practice is uncomfortable. To be clear, the huge contribution of excellent placements, passionate PE's and hardworking students to the profession of social work is not being minimised in any respect within this article. However, members of a profession based on values of anti-oppressive practice and social justice, we believe, should pause and reflect on their practice from time to time.

This article explores issues, new and longstanding, which impact upon student assessment in practice. Social Work England, the new specialist regulator of social work replacing the HCPC, is consulting on rules and professional standards (https://socialworkengland.org.uk/about/). Likewise, PEPS are being refreshed to assure quality of training and support for PE's. Both are welcomed, but whilst standards may provide essential scaffolding, the building itself should still be reviewed.

Hence now is timely for the profession to use imaginative speculation and reflective scepticism (Brookfield 1998) to consider alternatives to our current assessment practice. The authors wish to develop possible alternative models that could improve role clarity, accountability, and decision making. We are exploring ideas for shared assessment of students practice in which educators, social work employers and service users play genuine parts. The wider the discussion and idea sharing that takes place, the better will be the ideas generated. We welcome all thoughts, comments and ideas.

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Images to be included;



Image 1



Image 2

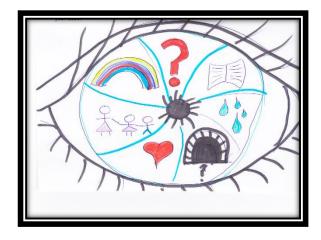


Image 3

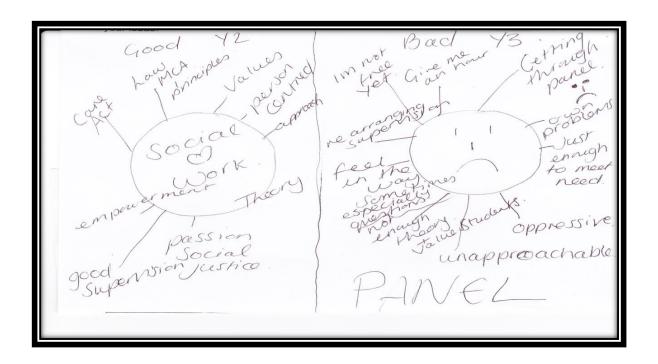


Image 4