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Embedding learning as a practice of value

Learning from the experiences of early career social workers in Scotland

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Title

Embedding learning as a practice of value. Learning from the experiences of early career social workers in Scotland.

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Keywords

early career, newly qualified social worker (NQSW), practice, professional learning, workplace learning, work-based learning.

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Abstract

Across the Global North, professional learning for social workers has become a matter of concern. Efforts to 'fix' the problem have focused narrowly on formal methods of learning and show limited connect with recent research. In this article we report on findings from a mixed-method longitudinal cohort study, which examined early career social workers experiences of learning over the first five years of professional practice. Drawing on a repeat-measure annual online survey, our findings provide an inside-view of how early career social workers in Scotland experience work-based learning over time and how professional learning for social workers can be enhanced. Quantitative and qualitative data were analysed using descriptive statistical analysis and reflexive thematic analysis respectively and integrated using a convergence coding matrix to identify meta-themes. Our findings support an integrative, developmental and ecological approach to professional learning, embedded in a value-led understanding of social work as practice. We invite the profession to embrace and embed learning as a 'practice of value', both as an antidote to managerial approaches to practice and learning and as a way of valuing the extraordinary work that social workers do.

Keywords

Early career, newly qualified social worker, practice professional learning, workplace learning, work-based learning.

Teaser text

This article presents findings from a study which examined early career social workers experiences of learning in Scotland, examined over the first five years of practice. Data was collected using an

annual online survey, sent to all newly qualified social workers who registered in Scotland in 2016 (year one of the study), through to 2021 (year five of the study). Our findings show that the workplace provides a valued environment for learning *and* that supports for work-based learning are under-developed, particularly as social workers progress in their careers. Our findings support greater attention to the relationship between formal and informal learning, and between work and learning. They also point to a need for the profession to value learning as an embedded part of the extraordinary work that social workers do.

Introduction

In recent decades, across the Global North, professional learning for social workers has become ‘a matter of concern’ (Latour, 2004), fuelled by a mix of shifting expectations of public services, media-amplified public protection ‘failures’ and associated political grandstanding (McCulloch, 2018). Policy and practice efforts to ‘fix’ the problem have focused narrowly on the efficacy of qualifying education, the ‘readiness’ of newly qualified social workers (NQSW) and, when funding has allowed, the implementation of national graduate induction programmes (Grant *et al.*, 2022, 2017a). These, mostly top-down, responses reflect the dominance of neoliberal and New Public Management approaches to public sector reform and improvement (Garrett, 2013; McDonald and Rogowski, 2023) and bear little relationship to recent research messages in this area. Research on professional learning, within and beyond social work, continues to endorse a more complex theory and practice, supporting attention to work and learning processes, career journeys, and the broader ecosystem within which work and learning sit (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1980; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Eraut, 2007; Ferguson, 2023). The persisting disconnect between research, policy and practice in this area means that new initiatives often miss the mark or deliver temporal improvements to one part of the learning ecosystem while actively undermining others (Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2014).

In this paper we step into this muddled space through examination of findings from a longitudinal cohort study, conducted in Scotland, which examined early career social workers' (ECSW) experiences of practice over the first five years. Our focus is on ECSWs' experiences of professional learning across a broad spectrum, including induction, supervision, peer support and other forms. Our aim is to understand how ECSWs experience learning over time and what, in their view, enhancement looks like. While our government-funded study shared some of the managerial preoccupations touched on above, our focus here on social workers' experiences of learning across their first five years provides an opportunity to understand this phenomenon through a more participatory and developmental lens.

Our findings support an integrative, developmental and ecological theory and practice for professional learning, embedded in a value-led vision of social work as 'practice'. Specifically, building on Whan (1986) and Webb's (2006) work in this area, we invite the profession to embrace learning as a 'practice of value'; that is, less as an instrumental means to a particular end, i.e., qualification or competence, and more as a normative and foundational dimension of the extraordinary work that social workers do.

We approach this paper from our position as five Scottish-based social work academics. While the UK nations share similarities in the arrangements governing social work education and professional learning, there are also important differences. At the time of writing, responsibility for education and professional learning rests primarily with the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC, 2017). There is currently no formal post-qualifying learning framework in Scotland, though there are requirements to maintain continuing professional learning for registration as a social worker. NQSWs are required to complete 144 hours of professional learning in their first year of practice and social workers a minimum of 90 hours over each three-year registration period. Since 2016, there have been plans to implement a Supported Year in Practice for NQSWs (Gillies, 2016) and, more recently, an Advanced Practice Framework for social workers. Both initiatives now sit under Scottish Government plans

and legislation for a new National Social Work Agency with the timelines for implementation unclear (Harrison, 2022). Induction for newly qualified social workers in Scotland, where supported, is delivered locally by individual local authorities, health and social care partnerships or social work agencies. More broadly, there is a range of accredited, formal, informal and self-directed learning opportunities available to social workers. However, availability and access to opportunities depends on variable local partnerships and individual agency arrangements to deliver, fund and support them (Gordon *et al.*, 2019). It is fair to say that the fragmented arrangements governing social work education, learning and practice in Scotland have constrained progress in this area.

Across this paper we use the terms 'newly qualified' to refer to social workers in their first year of practice, reflecting professional norms. We use the terms 'early career' to refer to social workers in their first five years of practice as a handle for the career-stage under study. We note however that by years four and five of our study, most participants stopped describing themselves as newly qualified or early career and described themselves simply as social workers.

Professional learning as a matter of concern

There is a developing body of research into the experiences of NQSWs as they transition from education into professional practice. Much of this work focuses on formal methods of professional learning - and on qualifying education specifically (Grant *et al.*, 2022; Facchini & Giraldo, 2013), on the newly qualified social worker and their 'readiness' for practice (Grant *et al.*, 2017a), on the experiences of child and family social workers (Chenot *et al.*, 2009) and on professional wellbeing and resilience (Grant and Kinman, 2014). These patterns reflect the socio-political turns which shape social work research across the UK and internationally, including a neo-liberal pattern of responding to alleged failings in public sector practice through state-led review, reform and, sometimes, research (Garrett, 2013). For example, following the first cycle of the flagship social work

degree qualification introduced across the UK in 2003, and, critically, in the wake of alleged high-profile child protection 'failings' (Laming, 2009; Ramesh, 2013) in the same period, political leaders in England were again raising 'serious doubts' (Sellick, 2008) about the preparedness of NQSWs for practice and the quality of social work education (Narey, 2014). Across the UK nations, professional learning returned as a matter of concern prompting refreshed reform priorities focused on education, the newly qualified social worker and the first year of practice (Grant *et al.*, 2017a). Similar patterns of concern and reform can be traced in professional learning discourse across the Global North (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2019; Frost *et al.*, 2013).

Across this body of work, piecemeal attention has been given to how social workers learn and what can be done to enhance early career learning. Studies show that most NQSWs feel reasonably well prepared by higher education (Pithouse and Scourfield, 2002; Lyons and Manion, 2004; Frost *et al.*, 2013; Grant *et al.*, 2017a; Ballantyne *et al.*, 2019), with some variations (Galvani and Forrester, 2011). Several studies note that qualifying education provides only a first foundation for practice (Grant *et al.*, 2017b) and a few highlight that initial feelings of confidence can diminish during the first year (Carpenter *et al.*, 2015; Jack and Donnellan, 2010). Most studies agree on the importance of a developmental construction of professional learning, extending beyond the first year and giving greater attention to learning in the workplace (Grant *et al.*, 2017b).

Research into early career experiences of workplace learning is particularly limited, constrained by a focus on formal learning processes and on the first year of practice (Ferguson, 2021). Findings reveal mixed experiences of induction, supervision and training in the first year (Moorhead *et al.*, 2016; Ballantyne *et al.*, 2019), linked to variations in support for learning within and beyond the workplace and the diversity of individual experience (Grant *et al.*, 2017b). Again, findings support a developmental-process model for the accumulation of professional expertise and, by extension, a more integrative professional learning strategy (Carpenter *et al.*, 2015; Moorehead *et al.*, 2020). The quality of relationships with colleagues and supervisors also emerges as important and is consistent

across analyses of induction, mentoring, supervision, training and wider learning processes (Chenot *et al.*, 2009; Cleveland, Warhurst and Legood, 2019; Kearns and McArdle, 2021). The value of peer support features lightly across this discussion, as does the importance of team and organisational cultures (Sen *et al.*, 2023). Several studies conclude that supports for learning need to be formalised to sustain learning in busy workplaces, though Moorehead *et al.* (2020) note that supports should also be flexible to respond to individual and local needs. Jack and Donnellan (2010: 305) add that learning strategies must go beyond a focus on what NQSWs need to know and do and ‘properly recognise the person within the developing professional’.

The above messages chime with wider research findings on professional learning which support a more integrative and ecological theory and practice. However, despite consensus across the research, social work professional learning policy and practice continues to tread a mostly narrow and conservative path. Further, Ferguson (2021) highlights the default position of individuals and organisations in resorting to formal, tangible training opportunities even in the context of policy and regulation that recognises and values informal and incidental learning. If social work organisations understand the importance of research findings for professional learning, they have struggled to embrace these in practice. This appears to reflect the dominance of a neo-liberal managerial logic across contemporary public services, where preoccupations with standardisation, regulation and control, enacted in contexts of enduring crises, continue to crowd out more creative possibilities (McCulloch and Cree, 2023).

Method

Following a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design (Creswell, 2005), our longitudinal study used an online survey as the primary mode of data collection, with semi-structured interviews providing consecutive sequential layers of data collection. The survey was deployed annually at

equidistant timepoints over a five-year period. Interviews were conducted sequentially at Years 1, 3, and 5. This paper draws from online survey data only. This is for two reasons: firstly, the volume of data obtained from the online survey was significant and adequate to saturate emerging themes. Secondly, whilst interview data brought nuance and depth, for our purpose here it also brings methodological complexity as we interviewed a small panel of NQSWs relative to a broader, more representative sample obtained in the national online survey. The online survey employed a mix of rating scales alongside a range of open and closed questions. A copy of the Year 5 survey is provided as a supplementary file. Key changes to the survey through Years 1-5 included the removal of sections on 'Previous work experience', 'Education' and 'Induction' following Year 1. The Year 5 survey also included two additional open text questions, one on the impact of COVID-19 on working practices, and one inviting reflection on what had been useful across the previous five years from social work education.

Participants were provided with information about the study and informed that consent to use their data would be implied by completing the survey online. SPSS (Version 24) was used to generate descriptive statistics (frequency tables) from quantitative survey data. Frequency analysis on numerical data was undertaken by one researcher, whilst another researcher employed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019) on qualitative data generated from open text boxes used in the online survey. A triangulation protocol (Farmer *et al.*, 2006) was developed to integrate qualitative and quantitative elements by way of a convergence coding matrix to enable researchers to identify emerging meta-themes.

The sample was purposive in focusing on NQSWs who qualified and registered in Scotland in 2016 (Year 1 of the study). All those in this cohort were invited by email to take part in each year of the study. The total population of registered NQSWs in Year 1 was 404, gradually dropping to 392 by Year 5. Please see Table 1 for details.

Table 1: Survey population and response rates

Year	Total Population	Total Online Survey Responses	Response Rate
1 (2016-2017)	404	157	38.8%
2 (2017-2018)	400	118	29.5%
3 (2018-2019)	397	120	30.2%
4 (2019-2020)	394	149	38%
5 (2020-2021)	392	74	18.8%

Response rates of under 50% are not unusual in social science research and the validity of survey research is still considered significant – particularly when the target population is sampled on a purposive basis as we have done here (Clark et al., 2021; Lund, 2023). Relatedly, attrition is expected in longitudinal studies, however a significant decrease in online survey participation is noted between Years’ 4 and 5. The level of attrition is significant and had a bearing on the weight given to data gathered at this final stage. As a mitigating action, all significant differences between Year 4 and Year 5 data are reported in the findings. With regard to the lower participation rates in Year 5, we note that participants were adjusting to the full impact of COVID-19 at this point, and it is possible that changed working practices and a significant increase in online work activity for many impacted on participation. Other possible reasons include survey fatigue often found in longitudinal work and associated with participant attrition (Clark et al., 2021).

On average, the majority of participants each year described themselves as female (79.9%) followed by male (18.3%). An average of 1% preferred not to say, and 0.8% preferred to self-describe their gender. The majority described themselves as 'white Scottish' (76.1%). In terms of age, the greatest

proportion of respondents came from the 25-34 years category (43.5%), followed by 35-44 years (26.9%), 45 years and over (24.9%) and 20-24 years (4.7%). The majority described themselves as having 'no disability' (93.8%).

Ethical approval was granted by Glasgow Caledonian University and University of Dundee.

Findings

Our findings are discussed across four key themes, reflecting our concern to understand ECSWs experiences of formal and informal work-based learning processes. These are:

- Induction
- Supervision
- Peer support
- Other learning opportunities/ experiences

Our focus in these findings is on how ECSWs experience work-based learning over time and how professional learning can be enhanced for social workers.

Induction

Induction refers here to the supports, formal and informal, provided to NQSWs as they transition from education into professional practice (Bradley, 2008). Echoing findings from existing studies (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2019), NQSWs in this study reported highly mixed experiences of induction. 76% reported some form of induction, 41% described a structured experience and 59% described an unstructured experience. Structured experiences of induction were described positively and frequently associated with being provided with an induction plan, support and direction from senior colleagues, scheduled training, protected time, and flexibility within a given structure. Unstructured

experiences were reported in negative terms with respondents often describing a sense of being 'left to it'. Unstructured experiences were also often associated with negative emotions, including feeling 'daunted', 'unprepared', 'abandoned' and 'unsure', as the example below illustrates:

I was introduced to team and left to ask questions as and when. No structure which was and still is very daunting. (Year 1 survey participant)

Unstructured experiences were often linked by participants to poor organisational planning, staffing pressures, workload demand and a culture of prioritising casework.

Despite the mixed experiences reported, induction emerged as a foundational feature of professional learning for ECSWs which, when done well, carried enduring practical and psychological benefits. Relatedly, participants were broadly consistent in terms of what enhancement looks like in space. Most favoured a supported, structured and multi-modal approach, that extends over time and is sufficiently flexible to respond to individual work and learning styles, needs and strengths. Shadowing experienced colleagues and co-working complex cases emerged as particularly valuable, including beyond the induction period and first year of practice.

The implications of our findings on induction are not complex. The workplace provides an optimal learning site for ECSWs, however quality learning in and through work does not just happen. It needs to be supported in ways that recognise the developing competence and confidence of the ECSW, the complex nature of practice and the import of the individual worker and their environment. Our findings support structured approaches to induction and they suggest that good induction requires more than standard programmes. Positive experiences of induction were almost always associated with a person-centred, locally owned and socio-relational commitment to learning. These experiences underline that learning is both a formal and an informal process, as well as being interpersonal and socially situated. Grasping these pluralities appears to be key to realising the potential of induction, and learning more broadly, across social work careers and contexts.

Supervision

Supervision is recognised as performing a critical function in day-to-day social work practice (Kettle, 2015), and as an important space to develop the application of new skills and knowledge (Kadushin, 1992). In line with the available literature (Moorehead *et al.*, 2020; Ballantyne *et al.*, 2019; Sharpe *et al.*, 2011), our findings present a mixed picture regarding ECSWs' experiences of professional supervision. Across the first five years, just under two thirds of participants reported having professional supervision with a manager monthly (average: 60.6%). However, through Years' 1 to 4, we found a gradually tapering down of supervision frequency, with those reporting monthly supervision falling from 65% to 55%. For most (average: 59.6%), supervision typically lasted for 61-90 minutes, a finding that was consistent across the five years.

Regarding the focus of supervision, across years, an average of 7 in 10 reported a focus on workload management. For many, this did not appear to be associated with a neglect of attention to other valued elements. For example, our findings show high levels of agreement with statements relating to the provision of appropriate advice and guidance (78%), explaining complex information (68%), attention to professional learning needs (67%) and space to express emotions (66%). The single outlier was an average of 53% reporting that they had sufficient time within supervision to reflect on practice.

Across the 5 years, an average of 66.5% of participants reported that they were happy with the quality of supervision received, with only slight fluctuations across years, while one third reported that they were not. This two third/ one third pattern of satisfaction/ dissatisfaction runs across our findings on supervision. For example, while, on average, 67% agreed that 'during supervision, I get time to discuss my professional learning needs', 33% did not. Variation in experiences of supervision is found across the NQSW literature (Sharpe *et al.*, 2011) and our findings show that these endure over time.

Qualitative responses to our questions on supervision produced a more nuanced understanding of what mattered to participants when it comes to improving support for learning. As the examples below illustrate, participants spoke to a desire for supervision to move beyond a managerial focus on casework towards a more integrative, personalised, reflective and developmental exchange, with this becoming more prominent as ECSWs progress in their careers. Many also called for more support with the emotional dimensions of practice, without the feelings of judgement that can often accompany this (see also Ingram, 2015):

There needs to be a formal plan that is structured with equal emphasis on case load management, professional learning needs and emotional support ... protected time with both parties engaged in the meeting, rather than mobile phones on and taking calls etc. (Year 1 survey participant)

I would like my supervisor to focus more on theorising and actually learning from my cases as opposed to signposting my service users to other services in response to their issues. I would like to speak openly and honestly about my own thoughts and feelings regarding my role and responsibilities and experiences without feeling judged by my Team Manager. I would like to discuss my continuing professional development. (Year 2 survey participant)

Less of a technical exchange focussed on case/ workload management and more of a reflective discussion focussed on practice development, including opportunities for attention to complexity constraints, discussion of theory, methods and interventions, emotional wellbeing. (Year 3 survey participant)

In common with wider studies (Sharpe *et al.*, 2011; Ballantyne *et al.*, 2019), our findings reveal the value that ECSWs place on professional supervision across the first five years *and* provide a mandate for improvement. They indicate that we need to get the basics of supervision right –

protected time, a personalised and integrative approach, space for emotion - and we need to do this more consistently. They demonstrate that supervision provides an important mechanism for reflection on and learning from practice and that there is scope to make much more of this across career stages. And they show that organisational practices regarding how supervision is designed and embedded in the ecology of the workplace greatly influence social workers' experiences of it. Social work is defined as an extraordinary job and learning in practice a complex web (Ferguson, 2023). Realising the potential of supervision for social workers perhaps depends on the extent to which professionals can work together to protect supervision as a developmental space, including in the face of constraining logics of managerialism and risk aversion (Webb, 2006).

Peer support

Support between colleagues is emerging as a critical dimension of workplace learning for social workers, the benefits of which have been underplayed and mostly absent from empirical research over the years (Ingram, 2015). Across the course of our study, peer support emerged consistently as a highly valued source of support and learning for almost all respondents. Year on year, it outperformed other learning processes analysed in terms of rates of agreement on the benefits received. On average, more than 9 in 10 participants agreed that they felt supported by their colleagues (91.3%) and that colleagues gave them good advice and guidance (93%). Just under 9 in 10 agreed that they felt they were learning from their colleagues (89.6%) and that their colleagues are good at explaining complex information (85.1%). More than 8 in 10 (83.7%) reported that they can express their emotions to colleagues. We found only slight fluctuations in rates of agreement with the above statements across years with no significant patterns noted. Our findings in this area are clear: across the first five years, ECSWs placed unparalleled value on peer support as a learning process and report a range of benefits from it. Our findings echo Eraut's (2007) seminal work in this area, who found that proximal and informal support was often more important for learning than that provided by formally designated helpers (see also Ferguson, 2023).

Across years, participants described two core and overlapping elements of peer support, namely advice and guidance, and emotional care and support. The former emerged as an expansive category and included (i) practical information on systems, processes and tools; (ii) guidance on professional relationships and networks; (iii) advice on learning resources and training; and (iv) reflexive discussion of casework and ethical dilemmas. The qualitative response below from a Year 1 participant illustrates key aspects of this:

My colleagues and peers contribute to my professional development on a daily basis when they respond with knowledge to questions I ask. Knowledge of how to identify the most appropriate person, knowledge of local support services and their experience of different service providers ... what activities/groups are running etc. Informing me of ... how best to save time ... how to manage incoming information. The majority ... also have an awareness of how hectic things are so I learn how to ... I adopt good examples... (Year 1 survey participant)

Emotional care and support typically involved the provision of space to talk, listen to, and reflect on experiences; expressions of nurture, and an absence of 'judgement'. From Year 2 onwards, we found that increasing numbers of participants framed peer support as an opportunity for reflexive discussion and shared learning around complex casework. Relatedly, while Year 1 respondents mostly discussed peer support as something received from colleagues, from Year 2 this was increasingly discussed and understood as a *reciprocal* relationship. We also found changes in the frequency of advice and guidance sought from colleagues over time, with those reporting seeking advice or guidance on a 'frequent' basis gradually decreasing from 75.4% in Year 1 to 36.2% by year 5. The response below, from a Year 5 participant, speaks to some of these subtle shifts, while also underlining the benefits of peer support across years.

I have a fantastic team and this is why I have stayed in my current role for nearly 4 years. There is a mix of experience and we get along together and are able to ask each

other for help without judgement. The support can be in the form of listening to frustrations on difficult or upsetting cases, to practical advice about procedures such as what form to fill out and general discussions about what would you do in this situation or have you encountered this before [or] how do I manage this. (Year 5 survey participant)

Surprisingly, we found no significant shifts in participant accounts of peer support during the COVID-19 pandemic, when most of our participants, then in their fourth and fifth year of practice, were required to work from home. This sits in contrast to findings from our study of NQSWs entering practice during the pandemic (Sen *et al.*, 2023) and appears to reflect the fact that, for most ECSWs, peer support relationships were by then developed and therefore resilient to even significant, albeit temporal, changes in the work environment.

This is the first study to examine the evolving nature of peer support amongst ECSWs in Scotland. Our findings indicate that, for most, the focus and flow of peer support evolves as ECSWs develop in their careers: as they develop baseline knowledge and skill, confidence in their role and relationships, and in their capacity to give and receive advice and support. Further, the capacity of peer support to 'keep pace' with workers developing learning and support needs emerged as a strength and appears to reflect that peer support flows through reciprocal and reflexive relationships.

Across years, the shape of peer support emerged as a mostly informal and ad-hoc process that occurred through routine working relationships, talking and listening between colleagues, observation and emotional intelligence. A small number of participants discussed peer support as a more structured process occurring, for example, through team/supported case discussions, a shared-caseload approach, scheduled peer support meetings and peer-led learning and development events. Though these examples were described positively, in common with wider

studies, they were rare and contingent on the initiative and motivation of individuals (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2019).

We also found exceptions to the accounts above, with a small minority of respondents reporting poor access to and/or experiences of peer support within their team and organisation. Poor experiences were typically associated with high levels of staff absence, workload pressures, difficult team dynamics, lack of experience within a team, the rise of agile and home working practices and, critically, an interplay of the dimensions described. In these instances, the informal and ad-hoc nature of peer support, its reliance on individuals and the cultures they co-create, emerged as a vulnerability rather than a strength. Author's own (2021) also reports that though social workers' proximity to each other is vital to one another's learning, opportunities for connecting in physical and temporal spaces continue to diminish. These findings underline that peer support, like all learning processes, is embedded within a wider team, organisational and socio-political culture and ecosystem, with important implications for nurture and development (see also Ruch, 2007). This message is salient as social work organisations embrace, often uncritically, agile and hybrid work practices and other kinds of workplace redesign. In this study, agile and hybrid working practices were not necessarily problematic in and of themselves, however, when advanced narrowly they can present significant constraints on already undervalued opportunities for professional socialisation, relationship building, learning and support (Jeyasingham, 2016).

The key finding here is that ECSWs place unparalleled value on peer support as a learning process and report a range of benefits from it. Peer support also offers distinct benefits, linked to its capacity to combine timely practical advice and guidance with emotional care and support in ways that are nurturing and non-judgemental. Peer support also displays a capacity to 'keep pace' with social workers' developing learning needs, including through periods of challenge, linked to the fact that it flows through person-centred, reflexive and reciprocal relationships. Its features emerged as

particularly relevant to ECSWs as they navigate the practical, emotional and political dimensions of work and learning. In common with wider studies (Ruch, 2007; Ingram, 2015; Helm 2022), our findings support greater investment in peer-based learning for social workers, as part of a more evidence-based approach to workplace learning and design.

Satisfaction with learning

Participants reported reasonable levels of satisfaction with the amount of learning and development opportunities available to them in their first year, with 61% either satisfied or very satisfied.

However, satisfaction rates fell steadily each year, to a low of 36% in Year 4, before rising again to 50% in Year 5 (qualitative data indicates that improved satisfaction rates were associated with reduced expectations of employers during COVID-19). Relatedly, we found high but diminishing levels of satisfaction with the quality of the learning and development opportunities available over the five-year period. In Year 1, 90% of participants rated the quality of the learning available as satisfactory or above. This reflected a strong degree of satisfaction with the range and relevance of the mostly in-house opportunities provided at the time. However, satisfaction with 'quality' fell each year, achieving only 52% in Year 4 and 50% by Year 5.

Qualitative data indicates that diminishing satisfaction with the amount and quality of learning opportunities reflects a sectoral turn towards in-house and multi-disciplinary training. While this was described by many as a good fit in Year 1, it was associated with diminishing levels of satisfaction as ECSWs progressed in their careers (see also Ferguson, 2021). When asked how employers could best support learning, from Year 2 onwards, participants increasingly described wanting access to a wider range and choice of learning opportunities 'beyond in-house training'. For most, access to more 'role-specific', 'specialist', 'advanced', 'external' and award-bearing opportunities - relevant to their role and stage – emerged as important:

Provide training courses. Currently there are none at the level of knowledge I require. Most training courses are designed for frontline council workers, not social workers. (Year 5 survey participant)

Develop more specific training for social workers. The multi-disciplinary training can be good but on issues such as child protection or domestic abuse it can be simplified in order to be helpful to each professional. Social workers specific training could be more relevant and advanced. (Year 5 survey participant)

The above responses also reveal a tendency amongst participants to equate learning with training and other formal methods (see also Ferguson, 2021). Our interview data, not reported on in this paper, suggests that practitioners can and do look beyond this, particularly when supported to do so.

In summary, our findings indicate the while most ECSWs are reasonably satisfied with the learning opportunities available in their first year, satisfaction rates drop steadily and notably in following years. These findings align with the findings of several UK reviews of post-qualifying learning for social workers, which point to the effects of diminishing investment in learning, an over-reliance on baseline, in-house and multi-disciplinary provision, and reduced access to external and award bearing opportunities (Laming, 2009; Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2014; Gordon *et al.*, 2019). We support calls to develop more hybrid models of *continuous* professional development, that integrate improved work-based opportunities with a wider and more responsive range of external opportunities and pathways.

Professional learning as a practice of value

This paper reports on ECSWs experiences of work-based learning, examined over a five-year period. Our attention to this topic responds to narrow accounts of and approaches to early career learning as

a matter of concern, and a desire to contribute to more integrative and embedded ways of thinking about learning and practice.

Our findings indicate that the workplace can provide a rich, responsive and nurturing learning environment for ECSWs, and that workplace supports for learning remain under-developed. Social workers in this study report a highly mixed experience of formal work-based learning processes, consistent across experiences of induction, supervision and training and, our study shows, across the first five years of practice. Relatedly, our findings show diminishing levels of satisfaction with the formal learning opportunities available to ECSWs as they progress in their careers, and with recent approaches to training in particular. Poor experiences of post-qualifying learning are often explained by differences in organisational commitment to early career learning, hence recent investment in national NQSW induction programmes, however, our findings also point to a professional and political failure to coherently envision and embed learning beyond the first year of practice, within and beyond the workplace. Peer support emerged as resilient to some of the above constraints and was associated with unparalleled levels of satisfaction through the first five years. This was linked primarily to its capacity to 'keep pace' with ECSWs' developing learning needs and its responsiveness to the practical, dilemmatic, and emotional nature of practice. However, peer support also emerged as under-valued and poorly supported by employers and others, linked to a longstanding pattern of undervaluing informal learning processes.

As regards enhancing early career learning, our findings underscore the plural nature of what matters to ECSWs and endorses the value of both formal and informal learning processes. Specifically, our findings support planned, supported and protected approaches to workplace learning, including but not restricted to induction, supervision and training, and they endorse explicit supports for informal and naturally occurring learning processes, specifically those which flow through routine practice relationships and processes. Across these domains, ECSWs favoured relational, reflexive, situated and nurturing learning processes, that extend over time and are sufficiently personalised to respond

to individual and local work and learning and needs. Critically, our findings underline the deeply enmeshed nature of professional identity, work and learning and the need to conceive of these dimensions in much more synergistic ways.

A key challenge here is that some of the above messages are not new. They align with the findings of several key studies on professional, post-qualifying and workplace learning and point to a persisting disconnect between research, policy and practice in this area. Further, as Ferguson (2021) notes, even when policy or practice development has kept pace with research messages, more innovative and integrative learning initiatives have struggled to take root. Much of this struggle reflects the state of social work across much of the Global North, specifically the dominance of neoliberal and new public management approaches to professional learning and an associated emphasis on top down, bureaucratic and reductive-technical approaches to change and improvement. However, social work must also confront its own failure to recognise and value the relationship between learning, research and practice, as fundamentally integrated elements of its transformative vision and method (McDonald and Rogowski, 2023).

Looking forward, we see reasons for hope and dismay. In Scotland, work continues towards the implementation of a Supported Year in Practice for NQSWs, the development of an Advanced Practice Framework for social workers, and wider evidence-based efforts to advance more integrative learning practices (Ferguson, 2023). Similar examples can be traced across the Global North, with some countries further ahead than others (Moorhead *et al.*, 2020). However, even as these initiatives edge forward the vision and infrastructure required to enable and sustain a coherent learning strategy for social work remains grossly underdeveloped. In Scotland, local authority employers continue to describe being unable to fulfil even basic student placement commitments (Gordon *et al.*, 2020; Sadiki *et al.*, 2023). Relatedly, university-led post-qualifying learning provision continues to contract as the diverse learning needs of the profession bump up against the increasingly hard edges of a capitalist learning economy (Fraser, 2022).

We conclude by inviting the profession to embrace learning, across career stages, as a practice of value; that is, as a normative value and practice that is embedded in the routine and extraordinary work that social workers do. Such a conception of learning must, in turn, be embedded in a valued understanding of what social work is and we argue here for a renewed conceptualisation of social work as ‘practice’; that is, ‘as a form of practical moral engagement, and not primarily as a matter of technique’ (Whan, 1986:243). Our thinking here draws on old and new ideas of practice developed by Whan (1986) and others (Smeeton, 2016; Smith *et al.*, 2024) which, we suggest, offers a more hospitable frame for the vision of learning outlined in this paper than current managerial models. Webb (2006:33) make a similar case, where he invokes social work actors to reject the illusion of managerial approaches to managing risk and care and to reclaim social work as a ‘practice’ characterised by its ‘adherence to an ethical stance’. It is worth noting that similar ideas ground the definition of social work provided by International Federation of Social Workers’ (2014), which begins by asserting social work as a ‘practice-based profession’. Far from being a detached, intellectually light, or technical process, practice on these terms involves a continuous and reflexive interplay of inquiry, knowledge, values and action, whereby practice and learning proceed hand in hand.

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