

Learning from Disruption: Case studies in failing and marginal placements **[i]**

Professor Jonathan Parker
Bournemouth University, UK

Introduction

Disruption or potential failure in any walk of life can have profound implications for those involved; it can damage self esteem, reduce the capacity to persevere and can disturb others around the individual who has experienced failure. Practice learning, or field education, - that element of education in which students work and learn in agencies alongside qualified practitioners - represents a key component of qualifying social work education in many countries (Rai, 2004). It is perhaps surprising, given its centrality, that there is so little research or theorising undertaken into the termination of placements from any perspective (see Sharp and Danbury, 1999; Shapton, 2006/07 from a practice educator perspective). This paper examines what is known about disrupted, marginal or failing placements in social work programmes. It seeks to examine and theorise the perceptions and experiences of students in the UK who have been through the process. Power issues and imbalances are explored and the failed placement is considered as a rite of passage in professional development. The study on which this paper is based sought to develop and enhance future responses to placement disruption from all stakeholders in practice learning and some recommendations are made.

Failure and the practice learning context

In 2003, England became the first UK country to move to degree level education qualification as the minimum award for social work, with the other countries following from 2004. The social work degree covered core areas of learning such as law, social work process, communication, developmental psychology and mental health and disability issues and emphasised the inclusion of people who used social services within all aspects of the degree alongside other aspects of social work knowledge. This led to the development of very intensive learning experiences. The major change in social work education, however, resulted from the increase in practice learning days that students must undertake in order to qualify. This changed from 130 days under the previous qualification to 200 days that must be spent in practice learning which again concentrated the amount of learning in the degree. As well as undertaking 200 days practice learning, students must have at least two separate practice experiences with two distinct client groups. They must also have experience of undertaking statutory work during the placement. These changes have raised the profile of practice learning and the emphasis placed on it by students, faculty and practice agencies and have

created extra demands on agencies providing placements and numbers of placements available are less making them highly sought after by universities.

Undertaking practice learning is often said to be the one part of learning to be a social worker that students best remember (Doel and Shardlow, 2005). It is, after all, the desire to practise social work that brought students into qualifying social work education and practice learning is the forum in which they demonstrate their developing skills, hone and refine them. It is through field learning they learn to become practising social workers (Fortune *et al.*, 2007; Parker, 2007). Therefore, when things go wrong - a student fails a placement, a decision is made to terminate a placement or the opportunity collapses for some other reason - it can be devastating (Barlow and Hall, 2007). Some of the impacts resulting from failure or disruption can be seen in figure 1, including affective, instrumental and relational outcomes. The process can be distressing for all involved, student, practice teacher, supervisors, other staff within agency teams, academic staff, student colleagues and any sponsoring body (especially if the student is seconded or retained in some way by an agency). It may be that the sudden withdrawal of students from practice learning can have an adverse effect on people using services. They may believe this situation is in some way related to them or resulted from their behaviour. Relationships can also be disrupted between faculty and students, students and agencies, agencies and faculty and between individuals in each setting.

[pic]

Figure 1 The impact of disruption

Not only can the process of placement disruption have significant affective and relational outcomes, it may have a substantial economic cost and practical or instrumental results. It is likely that students will have undertaken considerable learning about social work practice, social issues and social work knowledge prior to undertaking their placement. Before engaging in this prior learning students may have paid tuition fees. Funding bodies (government or professional) may have invested in the students' learning. The payment of bursaries by agencies, input of university staff time and effort, student loss of income during the period and perhaps disruption of relationships and family lives as well as the potential removal of their future licence to practise may also exacerbate costs (Barron, 2004a). If the student is seconded from an agency there will be costs to cover to ensure the agency's work is completed as well as any direct funding awarded to the student. This level of investment represents an important factor to consider in the termination or disruption of practice learning experiences.

Economic costs, to the university, agencies or individuals, pale into insignificance when weighed against the potential dangers of passing and qualifying a student who is 'unfit' or 'unsuitable' for professional practice (Furness and Gilligan, 2004). We need only look to inquiry reports to highlight the importance of rigorous standards and training necessary for practice (see Laming, 2003; Stanley and Manthorpe, 2004). We may also consider potential economic, and emotional cost savings that may result from preventing things going wrong (Bostock *et al.*, 2005), although research evidence is lacking in this regard. However, the potential costs of disruption or termination of practice learning necessitate rigorous attention to assessment and to developing and implementing an effective, transparent process when things go wrong. Impact of failure from GSCC figures etc

There is a paucity of published work on placement failure or disruption in social work practice education. Barlow *et al.* (2006) consider disruption in the context of conflict, power and resistance. The lack of attention has been recognised in community nursing also (Skingley *et al.*, 2007) and the 'failure to fail' is rehearsed (Duffy, 2003). Professional body and agency literature is lacking. The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) position paper on practice learning and assessment does not deal with failing or marginal placements (Kearney, 2003). The professional registration body for social workers in England, the General Social Care Council (GSCC, 2002 page) call, in their university accreditation criteria, for programmes to provide a sufficient number of appropriately qualified practice teachers (whom they refer to as practice assessors); programmes will:

Provide for an assessment by an experienced and qualified social worker of the competence and safety of a student to become a social worker.

They do not, however, indicate how this assessment will take place. Each programme has been charged with developing policies to deal with the termination of training of students as part of the Care Council requirements. Programmes have developed policies, procedures and guidance relating to difficulties in practice learning which may reveal a sense of the ways in which these problems have been managed or are perceived. But it is not clear that these documents build on a systematic analysis of the student experience throughout the university sector.

The Higher Education Academy subject centre for social work and social policy (SWAP) in the UK identify that difficulties can occur on placement and offer brief notes of guidance on managing these situations, suggesting that clear communication, early identification of difficulties by tutor, practice teacher, student or Practice Assessment Panel is necessary, and that if a second opinion practice teacher is used they should be sufficiently experienced and supported by explicit guidelines (SWAP,

nd).

Department of Health (the English Government ministry responsible for social work education) initiatives provided no detailed guidance in respect of failing or marginal students, although prior research acknowledged that disproportionate numbers of black students were failing placements (Singh, 2000). Also, when black and minority ethnic practice teachers use their authority to fail a student they are more susceptible to challenge relating to their ability and the legitimacy of decisions made (Singh, 2006). The National Organisation for Practice Teaching in England (NOPT) is drafting guidance on practice teaching standards including guidance on failing students, but this is not yet published, whilst the Scottish sister group, SCOPT (2006), have produced a draft that deals explicitly with marginal or failing placements. SCOPT draw attention to university and agency procedures and the Scottish standards for practice, as well as encouraging practice teachers to use whatever learning support structures are available. Practice teachers are required to share concerns openly and at the earliest opportunity in a way that allows exploration of how competence can be achieved. Practice teachers are encouraged to examine their practice for possible elements of discrimination.

The clearest example of a critical focus on failing social work students in practice came with the publication of Sharp and Danbury's (1999) work. They devoted a book to this difficult and anxiety-provoking area. However, whilst learning opportunities, practice agency issues and practice teacher support issues are touched on, the focus concerns the inadequacies of the student and ways in which practice teachers may resolve these rather than looking at the involvement of all stakeholders or particularly concentrating on the student's experience.

A 'second opinion' practice teacher has been used as a means of introducing a fair, objective process when dealing with placement difficulties (Baldwin, 1993) and was part of the earlier social work award in the UK. McColgan and Douglas (1995) recognised the potential importance of this role but pointed out that there was little rigorous research into the use of a second opinion mechanism. From their experience, however, they argued it was a quintessential piece of placement management. Buchanan and McMullan (2000) saw wide variation in practice of the second opinion as a problem. They concluded that rather than introducing fairness and objectivity the role could increase anxiety and distress for the student, practice teacher and team involved. Again, they raise interesting questions from experience but these are not underpinned by rigorous research. Since the introduction of the 'degree' as the professional qualification in the UK the mandatory second opinion role has been removed but there is *de facto* continuation of the role in many programmes; albeit still with no standardization across programmes using this mechanism.

Research Question and Methodology

This study is unique in seeking to explore placement breakdown from the perspective of students. The study examines what their experiences were in respect of the processes involved in failure or breakdown and some of the intrapersonal processes and accommodations made to termination. The core question '*how do students perceive and experience the process of placement breakdown?*' forms the central focus of the study.

Sample and ethical considerations

A purposive sample of ten students or former social work students at a university in South West England were invited to participate in the project; seven agreed. Students were selected for invitation on the basis that they had experienced disrupted, marginal or failed placements during their education. The research took place through 2007/08 but involved students who had studied during the previous three years. Involvement in the research was voluntary and data were anonymised. Signed consent was sought from each participant after an outline of the research and its purpose was provided to them. Information and advice was provided students wanting as it was recognised that the issues discussed may be distressing. Any participant wishing to withdraw or postpone involvement was able to do so and assistance or advice was provided at that time. University ethics committee approval for the study was sought, granted and was shared with participants.

Data collection

Student narratives were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews (Arksey and Knight, 1999), specifically centring on their experience of placement breakdown. The protocol guiding the interviews was as follows:

- to describe what happened in placement
- when students noticed or it was pointed out to them that things were not proceeding as expected or required
- what processes were put in train to address identified issues
- how these helped or hindered the process
- what their feelings, beliefs and experiences were
- what might have made the process better, what worked well and what did not work as well as it could have

Analysis

Analysis followed an iterative model of analytic induction, which seeks to examine the hypotheses made and recognises the interplay between the inductive and deductive processes of research (Patton, 2002; Spencer *et al.*, 2003). Core themes and patterns were explored across the areas considered

and models of the process of failure/termination/disruption were constructed and tested against the data gathered (see Roberts, 2002). Alternative understandings were examined to revise hypotheses and to further examine the 'nature' of failing placements (Ryan and Bernard, 2000). Preliminary models and understandings were shared with participants in an anonymised and sensitive fashion that valued the identity and self in the narrative whilst seeking views and clarifications (see Holloway and Freshwater, 2007).

Findings

Types of disruption and first impressions

The participants interviewed had heterogeneous experiences in placement. Disruption included failure of the placement in three cases, termination and change of placement (three cases), and a disrupted outcome resulting in a further first attempt at the placement.

Initial impressions of the placement setting also varied. Interestingly, the students whose placement changed expressed some negative feelings towards the setting, whilst those who failed or had a disrupted outcome necessitating a re-take were enthusiastic as summarised by the following quotation:

My first overall impression was that this was going to be a good overall environment in which to learn to develop the skills I already had.

Key findings

There were no surprises in the areas discussed by students and the factors they identified as important in their disrupted placements. Figure 2 shows the contextual issues, the nexus of practice learning personnel and practice learning processes that students highlighted. Whilst, in the UK, there is the expectation that student social workers will be assessed by a qualified and experienced practice teacher, there are no firm criteria indicating who should be involved in the process. Indeed, there are a wide range of models in practice (Doel et al., 2007). Most universities engage a member of staff to undertake placement coordination and arrangement and many use a personal academic tutor system to support practice. In agencies where there is no qualified member of staff it may be that an external practice teacher is employed and supported in the agency by a practice supervisor who will contribute but not have responsibility for the assessment. All these personnel were involved in the present study.

Figure 2 portrays how the focus on practice personnel and processes were encompassed by two conceptual meta-issues: the power imbalance perceived by

students during placement and the personal learning and development achieved during a traumatic process and 'rite of passage'.

[pic]

Figure 2 Student issues arising from the research

All students interviewed noticed early in the placement (before commencement up to one month in) that there were potential problems with the placement. The issues recognised ranged from concerns about the practice teacher – qualifications, role and intent – the agency or management ethos for practice learning, opportunities for developing learning or specific events:

There was a struggle probably all the way through the placement to be honest...

Straight away for me there was a big issue.

I was finding it quite difficult to – um – communicate with her (practice teacher).

The practice teacher was critical of my written work and I was not sure it was her role to correct my sentences and that.

Practice teacher relationship

The practice teacher is at the centre of the practice learning experience. Perceptions of practice teachers ranged from the extremely negative to the glowingly positive. But all students interviewed recognised the practice teacher as powerful because of their assessment responsibility. The corollary was that students expected appropriately qualified and experienced practice teachers, knowledgeable about the standards and requirements required for the placement and someone with whom they could negotiate at an interpersonal level. At times, there was value seen in having a practice teacher who was 'off-site' (external to the agency). This was so the student would not feel as though they were being continually observed and assessed, and as a counterbalance to agency-based practice supervisors.

The problem is that when you've got your practice teacher and supervisor on one place watching you every minute of the day. You're under the spotlight.

The perceived power imbalances were considered to be offset potentially by an off-site model and that this might assist where there are gender issues, and ensuring there is a right of reply to the placement assessment.

When the practice teacher/student relationship was good and valued it seemed to provide great support, as indicated in the literature (Lefevre, 2005). This seemed to be connected to availability:

It was knowing that I did have my practice teacher constantly available by telephone by email whatever... The support from my practice teacher was overwhelmingly the one thing that kept me going.

However, there was recognition of the legitimacy of the teacher/assessor role and the appropriate use of power in the relationship:

I suppose the other thing – coming here on placement and being able to prove myself here and having a different practice teacher – it's a very nurturing environment here. X was the practice teacher and whilst initially it's probably fair to say we were cagey, weighed each other up first of all – me thinking are you going to treat me the same, and her only having the university perspective on me – but over that 100 days I actually enjoyed having her as a practice teacher.

Where students had both a practice teacher and practice supervisor co-located within the agency there were sometimes questions of collusion, (in)competence or lack of preparation for role and a concern about continued surveillance. One student, after failing a placement, described the following positive experience in a repeated placement:

The other thing I'd recommend to anyone as well is having an on-site practice supervisor but an off-site practice teacher. There's a gender perspective as well. My first two practice teachers were female... But my practice supervisor last time was male and we could have discussions about men and women in social work and the gendered context.

Lefevre (2005) inquired about perceptions of the practice teacher-student relationship and the impact it was thought to have on learning and development and assessment. Her work echoes that of others who have found that relationships between practice teachers and their students are important to positive placement experiences (Sussman *et al.*, 2007, Bogo *et al.* 2002).

Second opinions

The second opinion practice teacher, brought in on some programmes when things go wrong, was seen in ambivalent terms, as toothless, but reaffirming:

Firstly, if I think about the second opinion process. I think that for me was actually, I was going to say a toothless gesture; it was tokenistic. But the one thing it did for me was to reaffirm that I could do the job. It did have a positive. It came too late.

The process was considered too much part of the system and on the side of the practice teacher rather than objective. There also a concern that there was not enough time to make a valid assessment:

A second opinion was done, yeah. The final meeting recommended this. Brief involvement: reflecting back on that it's like doing an assessment with a child you don't get all the answers' you want in the first visit, you've got to go back again. And for me, for something as important as this was – not just me, my children, my family and everything else around me to come to a conclusion having spoken to me for an hour, half an hour. 'Cos at the time, again, I'm not in the best of moods so I don't want to be talking about it. The shutters come down, what's the point, it's doom and gloom. But it was ok for the second opinion to sit in another office with the practice teacher and manager in the same room which to me was wrong.

I think the procedures on that need changing. There should be enough time for students to digest what has gone on. I'd been told I was failing, I'd failed that I wasn't being passed but before I'd finished the placement the second opinion was brought in to do the questions. That all revolves around, although the wording of some of my answers isn't brilliant, when I sit there and say to someone 'I just want to put it behind me'

The objectivity of the second opinion practice teacher role needs addressing. The potential independence of the role could redress some of the power issues experienced by students at the point of potential failure or breakdown. The positive and affirming

aspects of the role are in evidence.

Practice coordinator/university tutor

The practice placement coordinator role was viewed as positive and a support when things were going wrong:

I then the following week came in to speak to the practice coordinator and explained to her some of the concerns I had about the placement. She was absolutely amazing, really supportive. Talked through some incidents that had occurred and she said would you be prepared to put it in writing for me: which I agreed to do. Following that she asked if I would be prepared for that report to be passed to the organisation so that the university could go direct to the organisation and you know put in a complaint about the lack of supervision, the lack of understanding of what was needed on placement which I agreed to.

Positive appreciation of practice coordinators was maintained even when the practice learning experience was negative. Equally supportive was the university tutor although respondents did believe that the tutor should be proactive in calling meetings when things go wrong and contacting the student to check progress, in providing advice and being accessible:

The main thing for me is that the tutor's accessible, mine wasn't that accessible. That wasn't good and didn't help in the slightest as I couldn't get hold of him from one day to the next. I want their advice. The student needs someone located in the university that's easily accessible.

Because my tutor was inaccessible it was difficult – that was the main issue for me. The last placement I've just done my tutor now, I could get hold of him any time I wanted. Get a message to him and he's back to you.

A team approach to placement management has been suggested (Durkin and Shergill, 2000), which emphasises the need for explicit guidance for resolving difficulties and providing support when things go wrong, especially where there is a possibility of a student failing. However, the focus on developing learning cultures within teams would suggest that such approaches offer potential for ensuring a rounded and collective approach to the assessment and identification of positive and negative placement experiences (Gould and Baldwin, 2004; Brown *et al.* 2007; Parker *et al.*, 2006).

Practice processes

Practice learning in the UK is governed by a range of processes that are central to the maintenance of quality and standards. A practice assessment panel, although not a mandatory requirement since the implementation of the social work degree, remains a core element of these processes for many universities. The panel scrutinises documentation and learning opportunities associated with placement learning and provides feedback on its adequacy and recommendations to practice teachers supporting students. Students interviewed for this research were excluded from the panel process although information about them and assessments of their practice were submitted. As one student said, '(t)he reports were submitted to the practice assessment panel. I was not invited but the practice teacher and second opinion were present.'

This process was experienced as an exercise in power and humiliating when an agreed resolution was overturned in a meeting from which the student was excluded. Another student believed she did not receive a full hearing and was suspicious about a process in which she was not fully involved. This was compounded when she requested transcripts which were difficult to obtain:

...the practice coordinator suggested I respond to the practice teacher's report. There were lots of inaccuracies... we took it over on the morning of the panel and actually I don't think it was read at all. I think it was a pointless gesture...

I actually asked for transcripts about what had happened at the panel. I was just concerned that I wasn't given a full hearing. I don't think the panel had a full understanding of what went on in this placement... the comments I got back, seemed to suggest they hadn't read it. Also, they had a third reader who had written a report and that had mysteriously disappeared from my portfolio although it should have been in there... when I met to pick up the portfolio, (someone) said it's kicking about here somewhere. Part of your portfolio to be just kicking around somewhere! Actually, a really insensitive thing to say to somebody.

Another student also experienced the loss of feedback on his practice portfolio (the written work associated with the placement), indicating a need for robust and transparent administrative structures. This student also commented that the Panel transcript he received some three months after the event included inaccuracies but when he challenged this he was told there is no right of appeal.

The power invested in the panel process was perceived as part of an impenetrable system that prevented the student having a voice in difficult circumstances. Other processes concerned with placement arrangement, such as monitoring and management, were also experienced as less than helpful, and that student views and needs were not taken into account.

Students, probably the great majority of us, feel that the forms we fill in are largely disregarded and it's just a paper exercise. If you look at what I wrote and what I got. It's like completely opposite.

If I could change one thing in the process: take more notice of what we write down and what we say and our personal tutors as well. Mine had no idea about the placement. She was shocked, she could have more input into the whole process. Without personal knowledge I would question how you can pick a placement to meet the needs. Know you students.

The need to share information when developing and allocating placements goes further than providing information to university staff involved. One student thought the university was aware of significant changes within the placement agency but did not explore with them the impact of these on a forthcoming placement.

I think initially the university were aware that the management had changed at the first (placement), and I don't think they had made the acting manager aware of what was needed. And I think perhaps if they'd inquired about that in a little bit more detail they'd have decided that it wasn't appropriate and for a year three student...

Knowledge of the student could also be used by university tutors more proactively in seeking to remove people from inappropriate placements:

In hindsight I should have been taken out of the placement and I think that's partly up to me to have the strength and confidence to say that but if you're going through this your confidence is down, I think the university should have said something, my academic work is no problem at all. I don't think they actually took all this into account.

Planned recall days, in which students and practice teachers attended the university as a means of monitoring progress and sharing learning, were appreciated as supportive by students. One believed these days should occur earlier in the placement to pick up

when things are going wrong rather than allowing students 'to settle in placement and then come for the recall day.' However, a common view was that these days should be compulsory for all practice teachers and supervisors so they are made aware of the standards and requirements for the placement and so that timescales can be shared, agreed and adhered to, as shown by the following quotation:

There's those days which I believe aren't compulsory and she didn't attend those. That would be one way of her actually being familiar with the work we were supposed to do and the units 'cos she clearly had no idea of the requirements and guidelines. So that should be more; it should be mandatory so they are aware of what's expected of them what kind of work they should be doing with students.

Bucknell's (2000) solution-focused model would stress what students must do to pass, emphasising the notion of feedback and, where there is a danger of failure, identifying where they are, where they need to be and what they must do to get there so as to maximise the students' opportunities to pass. The model is not based on empirical research other than the experience of the author but Furness and Gilligan (2004) would agree with Bucknell that students who are assessed as not 'good enough' need clear identification of the reasons:

Opinions need to be backed up by evidence, while the evidence needs to be valid, sufficient, fair, reliable and clear ... and drawn from a range of sources and methods of assessment (Furness and Gilligan, 2004, p. 470)

Problems need to be identified early, the stress associated with such a situation must be acknowledged and the suitability of the practice area and learning needs requires evaluation. They state that their experience indicates that first placements have sometimes been passed on the 'benefit of the doubt' because of practice teacher inexperience, guilt or lack of opportunities. This compounds future difficulties. However, there is little firm agreement or clarity on what exactly constitutes unsuitability or a lack of fitness for practice and this area warrants further study.

Barron (2004b) employs the concept of 'fair play' to examine problems in placements that have arisen for social work students undertaking placements in social care settings, suggesting ways in which the quality of learning opportunities might be improved. He suggests that there has been a perception of social care as a 'poor relation' and looked upon less favourably by students. In this study, settings were compared and students' perspectives were considered to identify positive learning opportunities. A key finding indicated that there was some confusion over the social work role and that role and task clarification was crucial, alongside training,

evaluation and developing split-site placements.

Barron's paper is important given the drive to create new practice learning opportunities and the emphasis on non-traditional settings as a result of increased demands arising from the social work degree (Doel *et al.*, 2007). It is important to consider how positive experiences can be maximised and how constructive approaches to potential and actual problems can be developed to prevent disruption, mis-use of time and so on.

Shapton (2006/07) discusses an apparent reluctance on the part of practice teachers to fail students that echoes experience in nursing (Duffy, 2003). The 'failure to fail' derives from increased demands for placement days and shortage of experienced and qualified practice teachers, complex differences between pure academic assessment and assessment in practice, a lack of understanding and awareness of higher education regulations and procedures and the nature of the student/practice teacher relationship. He suggests two possible remedies. Firstly, drawn from Wenger's (1999) idea of communities of practice, he urges practice teachers to engage as a supportive community in learning and developing together which would create a structure of support when things go wrong. Secondly, Shapton asks universities to review their practice assessment strategies to ensure the complexities and differences to pure academic work are clear and known. He does not consider the experience from the student perspective.

Solutions

The students experiencing disruption in their placements offered a variety of solutions to the issues that relied on both internal measures and external forces. Some accepted the situation as something in which they were helpless:

Options? I really can't remember. I think it was discussed that I could come back next year. From what I remember the priority was before I could return it was to get my family situation sorted then I could give my all to the course. That was generally how it was left.

From that moment on I thought I'm not to get anywhere. I'm not going to fight it anymore. I may as well just get on with it.

Other students, however, challenge the situation and took back some control, however difficult that was:

I came home and really thought about the interview and how that went and thought I've really got to send an email. I've got to sort of do this, it's not meeting my personal learning needs. That was the most terrifying experience I've had since I've been on the course because (university staff) hold the power over us. I didn't want to get a bad name for moaning and kicking up a big stink. I thought it was going to be bad news for me but I had to do it.

For me it's having the confidence, I really had to go through a process of reflection; a process of 'is this right for me, do I challenge this, if I don't is it a precedent in my career for not challenging? But balanced against a fear of reprisal of some nature.

External solutions were also identified. One student believed the university should take the initiative to stop a placement and remove the student. Whilst recognising a responsibility to say something, the student suggested that confidence may be so low that someone else needed to give direction. Rather than remove her, the university tutor had suggested she carry on because the placement was near the end. Such advice may result from there being a shortage of placements as much as there being a concern to develop learning through continuation. The key solution, and again one addressing issues of power in the student-placement relationship, was that 'students need to be involved at every stage of the placement.'

Support needs were also identified by the students contributing to the research. These ranged from informal supports such as family and friends to more formal structures such as a student representative. A common thrust was for an independent forum or person to whom the student could bring complaints or discuss possible options. This was felt to provide a means of ensuring independence and objectivity in the assessment roles as the following two quotations demonstrate:

...I think there should be some forum where you can take it that's impartial. That's the whole thing, none of it's impartial or appeared to be impartial. The placement is partial and you've got the university which appeared to be unwieldy or not very supportive at all. An impartial forum or body that you can take it to.

I think it would've been useful for me, a very basic thing, but useful to have those options available to me written down 'cos it was such a difficult time it's quite difficult to take in and maybe if there was someone to speak to about the options at a later date; kind of independent, would be useful.

Discussion

The small sample size and varied experiences of disruption limit the findings. Different lengths of time from the initial experience of disruption and possibilities for reflection on it may have constructed particular ways of viewing the experience for respondents. Students who were in the process of failing were not approached. Whilst this may have limited some of the data gathered it protected participants from the difficult position of talking about issues affecting their immediate future on the programme. However, these limitations are offset by the concern to gain insight into specific narrative understandings. Interview data do not provide simple objective and uncontested knowledge of the social world of participants but a degree of co-construction of stories takes place (Davies, 1999). The narrative approach allowed participants to claim ownership of their stories and experiences and to create and present the meanings they associate with these narratives. As Holstein and Gubrium (1997) state, interviewing is an active meaning-making process. Narratives are not only descriptive but are constitutive of the self and identity and were, therefore, handled sensitively to ensure the participants were valued in the analysis of their stories (Holloway and Freshwater, 2007). The status of the researcher as a known figure to participants, and one in a position of authority could have had an impact on the interview and data collected. The context in which the interviews were held was also an important factor that may impact on the data. Interactions between researcher and participants and clarity of language, purpose and process were provided at all times. The analysis acknowledged the impact of the interviewer and examined issues arising from the context and interviewer/interviewee relationship.

It seems that power issues permeate relationships and thinking when experiencing a disrupted placement. French and Raven's (1960) classification of social power into administrative (role authority) and functional (personal characteristics) types is important (see figure 3). Administrative power can result from the position of practice teacher or assessor, coercive power can set the terms of student action and behaviour and practice teacher support within the placement setting and reward power may concern the allocation of work or resources to the student whilst on placement. Functional power may reside in the personal characteristics of the practice teacher (referent power) or their expert professional knowledge and skills. The negative experience of power imbalance was felt in a number of ways:

- In respect of perceived psychological games placed by practice teachers,
- In negotiating appropriate work for the placement,
- In making a moral stand or not when faced with poor practice, and
- in university processes that set the terms of the placement and appeared to exclude the student or which appear impenetrable when difficulties arose

On many occasions the students involved expressed a sense of powerlessness and lack of control or fear of reprisal if they were to challenge. However, the power to challenge, influence and transform the experience was also noted. Those who were prepared to challenge were able to take greater control of the process, or saw more clearly where issues may arise. It may be that those who failed placements were falsely optimistic or lacked reflection or those with an internal locus of control were better able to identify individual factors for change? As one student reflected:

Because the person (practice supervisor) was on a power trip I thought, this is too difficult to stay here. Knowing my rights and my background I took control.

[pic]

Figure 3 Power and the practice placement (after French and Raven)

Problems in the practice teacher-student relationship were not always recognised at first. The initial focus was on the wider placement setting and possible learning opportunities available. However, students noticed things going wrong early in placement. This begs the question of early monitoring, whether or not there are appropriate systems for identifying and resolving issues in the early stages, whether students feel able to identify problems and how these might be perceived. With placements being at a premium it is possible that universities may attempt to maintain a placement when action should be taken to terminate it. Practice teachers are important to programmes and therefore may gain the benefit of the doubt when problems arise – although Shapton (2007) would suggest this is not the case. It also adds weight to the importance of the practice teacher-student relationship (Lefevre, 2005). Key questions for universities and agencies planning and offering placements concern effective matching, adequate support, checking and auditing practice teacher qualifications and addressing issues that arise in a balanced way. Questions of gender, especially in respect of male students are also important here.

The question of gaze, visibility and constant scrutiny or assessment is interesting. Is it perceived by students as oppressive because they failed or does the constant emphasis on assessment contribute to a difficult situation? It is perhaps dependent on the situation and addressing power issues and reflecting upon them remains important. Power is a difficult and contested concept and cannot be understood simply as a commodity possessed in greater or lesser amounts and used to coerce and make happen. Tew (2006) explores the lack of clarity around power and different definitions. He states it has been seen as a 'thing' possessed by individuals or social systems to get

things done or to regulate and 'other' certain groups, or as a means to control the self and to cooperate with others and resist oppressive power. He suggests:

Rather than get caught in a futile debate between structuralist and post-structuralist positions, it may be helpful to acknowledge the possibility of both the top-down and the bottom-up operation of power: there may be systematic organization of power across particular constructions of social difference, and there may be localized and personal performances of power that can serve to either reinforce or stand against this. (Tew, 2006, p. 40)

Social work as an activity demands an analysis of power because of its function within social relations. This is no less the case for social work education. Power may be understood as legal authority, ability to act or perceived authority (Harris, 1997). However, assuming everyone has some power, the bilateral characteristics of power make the outcomes of exchanges unpredictable. Harris (1990) draws on Foucauldian analyses of power suggesting that where there is power there is resistance. There are two types of resistance: generative resistance which justifies the increased use of power and successful resistance which is transformative and results in intended change. In social work power is regulated by statute, procedures, complaints processes and so forth. Practice teachers are called to support students in understanding agency objectives, challenging and questioning them but understanding the legitimate authority of the agency and its meaning for service users and carers. Social work education is regulated by official bodies and processes, university quality and standards requirements and is operated through assessment and quality assurance processes. In this study, one process was the practice assessment panel. It needs to be explicitly acknowledged that power-relations operate within these regulatory systems, tuning them in favour of professional, executive authority. The recent inclusion of service users and carers begins to address one omission to the exercise of power in these processes but the exclusion of students (notwithstanding the complexities of inclusion) bolsters the control of students by others lending itself to forms of resistance which may be seen in the ways students react to placement disruption.

Bourdieu's (1998; 2004) concept of fields may add to our understanding of power. A social field is composed of forces whose necessity is imposed on agents engaged in that field – an acceptance of process and structure. Within social fields there are struggles within which agents with different positions, means and ends confront one another and contribute to the confirmation or transformation of its structure. The field of power is a space of force-relations between agents with different kinds of capital, dominating and struggling according to levels and perceptions of worth of capital.

Domination is not the direct and simple action exercised by a set of agents

(“the dominant class”) invested with powers of coercion. Rather it is the indirect effect of a complex set of actions engendered within the network of intersecting constraints which each of the dominants, thus dominated by the structure of the field though which domination is exerted, endures on behalf of all the others. (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 34)

Students experienced a power imbalance in respect of practice teachers who were accorded greater social capital as regards their position, status as a practitioner and professional capital. The assessment role and expert position was acknowledged as legitimate but resistance was expressed in relation to the university’s seeming acceptance of greater authority and capital by virtue of their status. The processes were seen as a site of struggle in which students vied against what was seen as an abuse of status rather than against perceived legitimate authority. Power was understood by students as residing in others and legitimised by role or status. However, they did not want to complain as they recognised the assessment function, and believed practice teachers may act in collusion with the university. They believed power was retained by those with a vested interest. There was also recognition of a tension between power invested within authorities and power within themselves to change things and to act. Power was seen as relational – positive and negative – and therefore something with which students could engage. When they did so, there was recognition of a negotiated new space to consider power issues in respect of the interviews held to discuss the experiences. It was, however, interesting that there was little student concern with economic power, especially given the potential impact failure could have on their finances immediately and into the future.

A rite of passage

Students experiencing disruption seemed to progress through a rite of passage to a deeper sense of themselves, to development and learning. This may not occur in all cases of disruption, of course, and this study was not able to study those who failed after disruption. The process of disruption and re-taking the placement may be understood as a form of liminality, a concept used before in understanding placement experiences (see Barlow *et al.* 2006). The concept of liminality came to the fore in anthropology through the work of Van Gennep (1906) who explored rites of passage. He suggested that agents were first stripped of their social status and introduced into a liminal state before emerging transformed into a new status. There is evidence of such ‘ritual’ in social work field education in which the ‘student’ experiences a change in status to ‘student social worker’ who is neither fully student nor social worker but ‘betwixt and between’, almost, as Turner (1969) suggests, becoming structurally invisible, until hopefully at the end of the placement they emerge nearer to the goal of social work status. Student whose placements are disrupted may become marginalised (Turner, 1974) and those controlling the ritual assuming executive power to determine status and value. Perhaps those with status and those passing through without complication guard

against potential 'pollution' (of themselves, other students, course reputation) by those who have not successfully negotiated the transition (see Douglas, 1966), by making the student 'inferior' negotiating further actions as though they were invisible. However, student engagement in this liminal stage could also be productive and developmental as the following quotation indicates:

It's bizarre I suppose it's about you developing as a person. I've actually learned a great deal not just about other people but about myself actually. If there's a positive in all that it's that, actually, I've learned lots of things about me. Some of them weren't very good and some were very good and I think if you can take on the not so good and indifferent bits of your development it's good. I can honestly say I know what it's like to experience an imbalance of power.

Implications for practice

An awareness of power issues and the disruption process helps us understand some of the processes of resistance, challenge, struggle and outcomes expressed by students. But it fails to offer transformative actions. Perhaps here the concept of empowerment – contested and problematic but much used in social work – is assistive. Empowerment concerns the use of one's own and collective power 'to challenge or undermine the disadvantages experienced by being a member of a marginalised group' (Thompson, 2008, p. 105). In the field of social work practice education, the commitment to this process requires a collective effort from students, practitioners and academics to challenge abuses of power identified and experienced and to synthesise from the interplay of various force fields (university requirements, professional standards, social work values and human rights) a more inclusive and supportive system for determining actions in disrupted placements.

Developing awareness of and acknowledging issues of power is important as is creating open and honest relationships in which power differences and impacts are acknowledged. Identifying obstacles to power sharing and increasing student competence, humanising relationships and working collectively to resolve placement issues is important (Walker *et al.*, 2008). However, from the student comments and experiences it seems that social work educators need to:

- Have systems and processes to 'hear' the student voice – when things go wrong and prior to allocation/matching
- Ensure fairness, transparency & objectivity in assessment and decision-making process
- provide on-going training for practice teachers & placement supervisors
- Develop an independent forum or system to ensure that resolutions are independent – e.g. second opinions

- Make university support for students, daily supervisors and practice teachers available and accessible
- Consider student involvement in decision-making processes such as practice assessment panels
- Ensure administrative processes are fit for purpose and potential for the loss of student work is minimised.

The disruption or failure of a placement can be devastating, and this can be increased by insensitivity and where there is a lack of robust systems in the educative process. However, when handled in an appropriate way a disrupted placement can be a site of enhanced learning. It is certainly an area with which social work academics should become more familiar, working with uncertainty and transition to model appropriate roles for students in this often bewildering situation.

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DISRUPTION

Affective

Relational

Instrumental

Perceptions

POWER ISSUES

Contextual issues

The practice learning nexus

Practice learning processes

Allocation of work

Placement issues

Things going wrong

Practice teacher, Practice supervisor

Practice coordinator, University tutor

Student

Practice assessment panel

Internal university processes

LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

French and Raven's classification

Administrative (role authority)

Functional (personal characteristics

PT status Coercive Reward

Personal characteristics Professional expertise