Unsung heroes: Who supports social work students on placement?

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Summary:

Since the introduction of the three year degree programme in 2003, social work education has undergone a number of significant changes. The time students spend on placement has been increased to two hundred days, and the range of placement opportunities and the way in which these placements have been configured has significantly diversified. A consistent feature over the years, however, has been the presence of a Practice Educator (PE) who has guided, assessed and taught the student whilst on placement. Unsurprisingly, the role of the PE and the pivotal relationship they have with the student has been explored in the past and features in social work literature.

This paper, however, concentrates on a range of other relationships which are of significance in providing support to students on placement. In particular it draws on research to discuss the role of the university contact tutor, the place of the wider team in which the student is sited, and the support offered by family, friends and others.

Placements and the work undertaken by PE's will continue to be integral to the delivery of social work education. It is, however, essential to recognise and value the often over looked role of others in providing support to students on placement.

Keywords: social work students; placements; university tutors; wider team; relationships

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Introduction

The creation of a new social work degree in 2003 led to a transformation of social work education and training, including the requirement that students should complete a minimum of two hundred days of practice learning in a social care setting (Department of Health, 2002). This increased emphasis on learning from practice, coupled with government targets doubling the number of social work students, brought many challenges to those involved in delivering and supporting the social work degree. Not least, the need to ensure the sufficiency and quality of practice learning opportunities (Williams, 2008).

The social work degree is no longer new and continues to evolve in an atmosphere of professional challenge and change. For example, the validity of the social work profession continues to be questioned by high profile cases such as Baby Peter and the perceived failure of social workers to intervene effectively in the lives of the most vulnerable children. The roles and responsibilities of social work have been both formally examined by government (GSCC, 2008) and informally questioned by the public and press. Given this context, and the current review of both the social work degree and the establishment of a social work taskforce, it is right that the profession considers the way it prepares students to become practitioners both in terms of the teaching input provided by the universities and the practice learning provided in the workplace.

The latter component is often viewed by students as being the most important part of their education and is seen by employers as an opportunity for students to engage in 'proper' hands on social work (Doel and Shardlow, 1996). Whilst it would be not be wise to uncritically accept the popularity and effectiveness of the placement, it is clear that it forms an integral part of student learning and is often highly valued.

Social work placements in the UK are configured in a number of different ways, using a number of different models. For example, the private,

voluntary and independent social care sector is increasingly being used as a source of placements in a way which would have been unthinkable a few years ago (Doel *et al* 2007). Creative supervisory arrangements are also being used, sometimes involving an off site practice educator (PE) and an on site supervisor.(Doel *et al* 2007). The two hundred day requirement is also configured in a number of innovative ways by universities according to local need and demand.

Central to the arrangement of all placements, however, is the use of a PE who fulfils a number of important roles including oversight and supervision, direct teaching, and critically the evaluation of competency (Danbury, 1994). The function and influence of the PE has been widely researched and the role is ordinarily viewed as being essential to the success or failure of the placement. The literature tends to echo a number of recurrent themes; the centrality of the PE to student learning, the way the student models their practice on the PE, and the significance of the inspiration/encouragement/guidance provided by the PE (Doel and Shardlow,1996; Parker, 2004; Buck, 2007).

In particular, research highlights the notion that the relationship between the PE and the student is of crucial importance. Lefevre (2005) traces the historical evolution of this relationship from being a quasi therapeutic, psycho dynamic type of relationship, in the early days of practice teaching, to a more egalitarian, functional relationship in contemporary social work. Whilst it might be possible to generalise about the evolution of styles and methods within practice teaching, educational relationships are complex and varied. Whether the relationship is as simple, or the progression as clear cut as portrayed, is open to debate. These misgivings apart, Lefevre (2005) provides an interesting study on the significance of relationship and concludes that feelings of anxiety, vulnerability, lack of confidence and dependency exhibited by students on placement were often a response to how the relationship between them and their PE was developed and sustained. Students who experienced a nurturing relationship characterised by openness, encouragement and creativity were far more likely to thrive than those who had an inflexible and uncaring relationship with their PE. This theme has been echoed by previous studies which found that student feedback on problematical placements often reflected the absence of a positive relationship

between student and PE (Urbanowski and Dwyer,1988; Rosenblatt and Mayer, 1975).

Whilst the importance of the PE should not be underestimated, other significant relational influences within the placement setting have not been so widely researched. It could be argued that a placement is a complex mix of relationships and influences, some negative, some positive. A student rarely enters a placement entirely unsupported. They often bring with them a diverse set of relationships comprising family, friends, other students, and university support systems. All of these relationships exert an influence on the student's ability to make sense of their placement and to achieve learning whilst on placement.

Equally, the PE does not work in isolation but is reliant on an evolving, eclectic set of relationships to assist him/her in making work available to the student, monitoring that work, and making objective decisions about competency. In other words, the PE requires the support of colleagues, managers, administrative staff, external agencies, service users and carers if the placement is to succeed.

This article, based on ongoing research, provides a student perspective on the significance of these wider relationships as a means of support, or hindrance, to the placement experience. In particular, it examines the role of the university based tutor, the influence of the wider team in which the placement occurs and the helpfulness, or otherwise, of family, friends and other students.

The study

In 2008 the Lincoln campus of the University of Lincoln celebrated the graduation of the first cohort of students from its BSc (Hons) Social Work programme. Given the landmark nature of this event, it felt appropriate to evaluate the success of the degree from a student and employer perspective. An innovative research study, involving both academic staff and current

students, was commenced to evaluate the extent to which the programme equips students for professional practice.

The initial phase of the research obtained the views of students immediately following qualification through a mixed methods approach using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Social work training at the University of Lincoln is offered at two sites; Lincoln and Hull. The questionnaire was distributed to all graduates (n = 118) constituting 39 graduates at the Lincoln Campus and 79 graduates at the Hull Campus. A total of 25 questionnaires were received from students at the Lincoln campus, giving a response rate of 64.1%. Nine questionnaires were returned from the Hull campus, giving a response rate of 11.4%.

Whilst it is acknowledged that the return rate is a limitation of the study, nine respondents (6 from Lincoln and 3 from Hull) subsequently agreed to take part in an in depth semi structured interview and the combined data was analysed. The questionnaire provided a considerable amount of background data concerning students' views of the course, whilst the interviews provided a more detailed analysis.

The initial data analysis raised a number of issues regarding how students are prepared for professional practice, including the significance of practice learning and the relationships which impact on students on placement. In particular, students provided interesting observations about the role of the university tutor and how they viewed their relationship with them.

The role of the university tutor

Comparatively little research has been undertaken into the role of the university tutor within social work education. Tutors traditionally have a variety of tasks encompassing the development of academic and professional skills, as well as a broad pastoral/welfare role, with individual students. This role is often in addition to formal teaching and pedagogical commitments. Contact with tutees is limited and often confined to

periodic group or individual tutorials throughout the academic year. Degenhardt (2003) further suggests that this level of support has diminished in recent years due to a diminution of resources, as opposed to sound educational reasoning. Moreover, it is not always the case that university tutors take responsibility for their 'own' tutorial group once they go out on placement. Consequently, prior contact between students and those tutors who support them on placement can be limited.

Prior to going on placement students were provided with a number of 'preparation for placement' days which offered advice and guidance on all aspects of placement life. Some tutors who would go on to provide placement support were involved in these days, but the majority of preparation was undertaken by the university Placement Co-ordinator and a small team of experienced PE's. Support to students on placement is given priority by the university but is often at arms length - telephone contact, e-mail correspondence, informal discussion at recall days, etc. Formally only two meetings take place with the tutor in the placement setting; one at the beginning to chair the learning agreement and one mid way through the placement to review learning and progress. The learning agreement places the onus on the student and PE to contact the university tutor should problems occur. If difficulties do emerge additional face to face support is provided.

The research literature perhaps reflects this limited contact by implying that both students and PE's hold ambivalent views regarding the role and significance of the university tutor in the management of the placement. For example, Sharp (2000) found that PE's sometimes felt undermined by tutors in the difficult task of failing a student and that their input was not particularly valued. Other studies indicate that PE's feel that tutors do not communicate as often as they should, do not sufficiently value the centrality of the role of the PE, and are viewed as being peripheral to the placement by both PE and student (Burgess and Phillips,2000; Shardlow and Doel, 2002).

This ambivalence, however, was not fully reflected by the responses given in the study. Data analysis of the questionnaires indicated a high degree of satisfaction with the role of staff in the university teaching and tutorial setting with thirty one

(76.4%) respondents indicating that staff were 'extremely important' or 'quite important' to their development. Crucially, no students indicated that staff were 'not very important' or 'not at all important' to their development whilst at university. Staff then were valued and seen to be of significance when undertaking university based teaching and support roles.

The semi structured interviews, however, found that respondents expressed divergent opinions concerning the quality of support they received from their university tutor whilst on placement. Five out of nine respondents expressed positive views, whilst the remaining four respondents were more critical.

Negative views of tutors tended to echo the criticisms raised within the literature. For example, one student in particular seemed to have great difficulty with her tutor who changed appointments, seemed to be rushed on his visits, was unwilling to look at her work and generally failed to provide adequate support. Another criticism from two interviewees was that tutors 'didn't do anything' even when they were aware of difficulties.

'I used to ring her up and say, look this placement is not working, I'm not getting out of it what I should be getting out of it. Could you do something about it? … and she would come in and sit there and not do a lot really.'

Two other interviewees indicated that they had had issues on placement but failed to contact their tutors because they did not feel confident that they would receive a helpful response. These negative experiences, however, were not typical of the cohort and other students indicated that they had received good support on placement.

What students valued about their tutor can be broken down into three discrete elements. Firstly, students appreciated a responsive tutor - someone who responded to e-mails, who replied to messages left for them and kept pre-arranged appointments. In passing, we may reflect that these attributes are the same as those mentioned by service users when referring to social workers. Speaking of the tutors who supported her on both of her placements, one

interviewee said

.. both of them attended their appointments as arranged, they were there, they responded to e-mails, telephone calls when I had things to clarify or issues .... I know when I e-mailed I got a response, if I needed support I know they both would have been there.'

Students also valued a tutor who actively supported them at times of crisis. This was not only support provided when students felt nervous about the placement or how they were to evidence their competency, but help at times of personal crisis. For example, two interviewees spoke of family and relationship problems that had adversely affected them on placement. Whilst their PE and other members of the team were supportive, it was the university tutor who provided the most assistance. For example, one student recalled having difficulties on her first placement and telephoning her university tutor in tears. Her concerns were recognised and acted upon. A second interviewee stated

I had a lot of things going on in the second placement as well, personal life, and he was able to really support me in that way and I was very appreciative because with all the stuff that was going on in my home life with family it was very difficult to undertake any sort of further study.

Finally, students also valued tutors who pushed them to succeed or challenged them about their practice. This appeared to be an extension of the pedagogical relationship that had previously existed in the campus setting. One interviewee acknowledged that her placement tutor had always academically pushed her and encouraged her to do better. Another interviewee stated that her tutor was especially skilful at challenging her to see how theory fitted with practice, or to consider different ways of working during placement visits. These insights were clearly valued as they gave added impetus to the placement and reinforced the work of the PE.

It is interesting that both positive and negative experiences of the support provided by university tutors to students on placement seem to reflect pre-existing relationships. For example, the interviewee who expressed most concern regarding her lack of support had complained at the commencement of her placement that she did not want the tutor allocated to her as her experience of him at university led her to doubt his ability to motivate her or to keep appointments. Yet those interviewees (n=5) who spoke positively of their relationship with their tutor on placement noted that they already had a good relationship with them from their contact at university. Consequently, they felt that their working relationship was already sufficiently well developed as to give them confidence that they would be appropriately supported.

In summary, whilst contact with university based tutors was sometimes limited, the quality of their input and the timeliness of their response was valued by students. Pre-existing relationships formed between individual students and tutors also seemed to offer some indication, at least in students' minds, as to how good the support provided by the tutor would be. Whilst university based staff are undoubtedly pressurised they need to recognise that the creation and development of a positive working relationship with their students is highly valued - both in the campus and on placement.

The role of the wider team

Contemporary social work education is firmly sited within a multi disciplinary, inter professional framework. As social workers are now employed in a range of organisations, working alongside an array of other professionals, it is appropriate that social work placements reflect the complexities and dynamism of practice. As has been previously argued, placements do not take place in a vacuum and students need to learn how to build and use positive relationships with a range of people who will be present in their placement setting.

All nine interviewees were asked about the role of the wider team in their development whilst on placement. A common theme, noted by three students, was the opportunity to learn from other professionals who were members of the wider team. As one interviewee stated:

... without a doubt the team were fantastic. It was a multi disciplinary team and I learned so much from everybody. There were probation officers, police officers, education workers. It was just fantastic.

Whilst other student experiences may not have been quite as vibrant, it was noticeable that the opportunity to work with and talk with professionals from other backgrounds was highly prized. Occupational therapists and community nurses were singled out as being particularly helpful in providing the opportunity to undertake shared work and joint visits. Again three interviewees mentioned how valuable it was to have 'lots of visits' with non social care colleagues. This may reflect their learning styles, but may also indicate that social work students genuinely do want to learn about other professional approaches.

Teams that were viewed as being supportive seemed to have had an explicit culture of learning. This was evident in a number of ways. For example, one team had a number of students on placement at the same time, another team had a lengthy history of providing placements, whilst others seemed to embrace the idea of learning through staff and students accessing courses and other forms of learning. These teams seemed to welcome students and implicitly gave students permission to approach a range of team members for advice and assistance - not just the PE. For example, one interviewee said;

Everyone was very supportive and it wasn't like I could only go to my supervisor, I could ask any of them for assistance and they were all more than willing to help, so they were all brilliant.

It was unclear what motivated these 'teaching teams' to provide such a positive experience. It could be argued that team managers, or experienced

practitioners within the team, set the tone - although this was not explicitly mentioned. Other research indicates that the employing organisation can be ambivalent, even hostile, towards staff to taking on the role of PE (Develin and Mathews, 2008). Given these contradictions and uncertainties, further research is required to examine the role of supportive teams as they can clearly be a source of inspiration.

Not all teams, however, were so supportive or harmonious. One interviewee, reflecting on her first placement said:

... they were all very nice but because they didn't understand why I was there I think they didn't include me in a lot of things that I would like to have been included on - like different meetings and things like that.

Whether this was due to poor practice within the team or a lack of proactivity from the student is unclear, but it highlights the need for universities to be rigorous in the way that placements are chosen and learning agreements are configured.

Another interviewee felt that difficulties with relationships and dynamics within the team impacted on her placement as staff tried to involve her in disputes and arguments. She had the good sense to stay outside of these games and reflected that she had learnt a valuable lesson from the experience:

You are not always going to work somewhere where everyone gets on. It's not always going to be rosy and great and you are going to have to find a way of managing things- conflict resolution. You are going to have to find a way of dealing with things and working with people, because it's the real world.

Two other interviewees challenged what they saw as poor practice in their teams. Both expressed concern about their perceived powerless positions as student learners within established teams and worried as to how their

challenges would be viewed. In the event, the teams were sufficiently mature and well managed to be able to accept the criticism and work through any relationship difficulties that subsequently arose. Two other students expressed dissatisfaction with team members who they did not 'get on with'.

We could perhaps reflect that students seemed to have gained a typical and valuable experience of the realities of working in disparate and vibrant teams where fellow team members are both a source of support and a cause of conflict.

Students appeared to have minimal contact with team managers. Given the complexities of team management and the breadth of responsibility that many managers carry, this is not perhaps surprising. As team managers seem to come to the fore when placements go wrong or where there are issues of competency or professional concern it would perhaps suggest that none of our respondents were weak practitioners (Sharp & Danbury 1999). This detached relationship between student and team manager is echoed elsewhere in research that suggests that team managers do not play a pivotal role in encouraging staff to become PE's (Develin and Mathews 2008). Two interviewees stated that team managers were supportive and could be approached if necessary. One, however, reported that her team warned her against approaching the team manager due to her firm and inflexible manner.

Finally, five out of nine interviewees implied that there were differences in the quality of support they received according to the size of the team in which they were placed. To generalise, the bigger the better! Larger teams seemed to be able to provide a greater breadth of experience, and were in a better position to offer inter professional learning.

For example, one interviewee said

… on the mental health placement, there was again a variety of professionals in that team including nursing staff, support workers and social workers and consultants and all sorts..

She noted that the variety of approaches and perspectives was helpful to her professional development as it encouraged her to think about the role of social work in a multi disciplinary setting. Smaller teams on the other hand could be stifling, with relationships being intense and inhibiting. For example, one interviewee recalled how her team comprised of herself, a manager & her PE. She felt unable to voice any concerns and hemmed in by people in authority who were continually assessing her.

Buck (2007) notes the importance of the wider team in her analysis of 'what makes a good placement'. We could further suggest that it is the relationships within the team, and the relationship that the student makes with the team, that is of prime importance. This is echoed by Bradley (2008) in her study of the induction experiences of newly qualified workers where the success of their induction programme seems to depend on the quality of the relationships the inductee forms with a range of team members including colleagues, administrative staff and managers. If these relationships are 'genuine, warm' and supportive the induction process is often felt to be successful. Teams therefore need to promote a learning culture and develop positive inter team relationships if they are to provide vibrant placement experiences. Given the apparent lack of managerial drive it is unclear how this ethos can be developed and sustained. It is unwise to speculate, but it may be driven by a few key members of staff who have developed a keen interest in practice education.

So far we have concentrated on the significance of formal relationships within the placement process. We now turn to those informal relationships which were identified as being of particular importance.

Other significant relationships

All nine respondents indicated that support from family members, friends and fellow students had been integral to the successful completion of the degree programme. This support ranged from proof reading assignments, providing 'tea and sympathy' when difficulties arose, sharing ideas and resources, offering encouragement and the giving of practical support such

as help with transport and child care arrangements. The importance of these informal relationships, especially the role of fellow students, has been previously noted (Buck, 2007, Papadaki and Nygren, 2006). In larger organisations, where there were a number of students present, students seemed able to replicate the supportive relationships they enjoyed in the university setting. Some PE's were able to organise group tutorials which were seen as being particularly valuable as they facilitated the sharing of ideas and experiences and echoed the familiarity of the university seminar.

On placement other relationships, notably the relationship with the PE, seem to take precedence over existing informal relationships. What was valued, however, was the sense of permanency and solidity provided by families, especially partners and parents, who could be turned to at times of stress or crisis. For example, one interviewee who was on a problematical overseas placement described contact from her mother as her major source of support. Without this consistent support she acknowledges that she would not have been able to successfully complete the placement.

It is also interesting that students explicitly recognised the centrality of the service user to their learning on placement. One interviewee in particular was able to articulate how service users had assisted her professional development whilst on placement. The direct feedback they gave to her helped to define her strengths and those areas of her professional development which required attention. She felt that her skill level increased on placement due to her contact with service users, and that she was able to improve her overall performance as well as assisting service users to improve their lives:

I suppose (that) service users have probably been of most importance (on placement) because without them I would not have been able to complete the course.

This fundamental relationship is sometimes overlooked in social work literature and it is refreshing that students value the privilege they have of learning from the people they work with.

Conclusion

This research has highlighted the significance of a range of relationships which contribute to the success or otherwise of a student placement. The pivotal role of the PE has been deliberately over looked in an attempt to concentrate on the importance of other relationships which are sometimes unseen and undervalued. Whilst the PE is always going to remain central to the placement, the importance of these other relationships should not be ignored as they provide a rich supportive context within which the student grows and develops.

Whilst it would be unwise to make too many recommendations from such a small study, the research indicates that placement organisers and university staff need to consider a number of themes.

Firstly, the importance of creating and sustaining positive relationships between university staff and students. As has been discussed, student perception of the quality of the support provided by tutors on placement seems to reflect pre-existing experience and relationships. Given the pressure of academic life it is not always easy to nurture students in the way that they would like. Nonetheless, it would appear that valued relationships are built on simple building blocks; such as good communication, keeping appointments, empathy and the ability to promote learning through challenge.

Secondly, this study highlights how valued placements in an inter professional setting were and demonstrates that students do want the opportunity to work with a range of professionals. Whilst this may not be 'new news' it does challenge those criticisms that were voiced when the new degree was launched which questioned the validity of placements where social workers were outnumbered by other professionals. Students value the opportunity to see other professions at work and seem to thrive in a multi professional atmosphere.

Thirdly, it was perhaps not surprising that students had mixed views of teams. Some teams were extremely supportive and further research is required as to what drives the culture that promotes these 'teaching teams'. A tentative conclusion from the study would be that larger teams are better equipped to meet the needs of students. Nonetheless, caution is required here as we may speculate that what students value from teams is the quality of opportunity, harmonious team dynamics and working relationships within the team that promote a learning environment. This often does not depend on size alone but reflects a more complicated mix of factors such as team management and culture. Finally, the study emphasises the importance of context in practice learning. Often the emphasis is on the relationship between student and PE which can implicitly exclude other significant elements within the teaching environment. As has been demonstrated, other relationships are crucial to the success or failure of the placement.

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