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Original Citation

Reflections from the 'front-line': Social workers' experiences of post qualifying child care training and their current work practices in the new children's services

Article content – category 4 'Applied Research in children's services'

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Reflections from the 'front-line': Social workers' experiences of post qualifying child care training and their current work practices in the new children's services

Abstract

In the context of current developments in children's services and increased emphasis on workforce development, the authors describe a survey of successful completers of a Post-qualifying Child Care Award Programme, one of 18 such programmes in England which ran between 2001 and 2006/7. The survey's aims were two-fold: firstly, to gather the respondents' overall evaluations of their PQ training and information about their past and current work circumstances; and, secondly, to explore their knowledge and opinions on the latest developments in children's services in relation to their own work practices. The findings from the survey are outlined under four themes which are then discussed in relation to other relevant studies, reviews on the role and tasks of social workers and current developments associated with the *Every Child Matters* agenda and the integrated workforce. Concerns are raised about whether social work professionalism is being effectively utilised within the current children's services arrangements.

Summary of Policy and Practice implications

The value of post qualifying training in enhancing experienced social workers' competence and confidence in their work to improve outcomes for children and families is emphasised and it is argued that such opportunities should be funded and supported on a similar basis to that which pertains in other professions, such as in medicine and nursing. It is also argued that greater attention should be paid to the importance service users and social workers place on the relational aspects of social work and its significant contribution to work satisfaction. Following on from this, it is suggested that there is a need to consider the negative impact of some current work practices on direct service delivery/contact with service users and to address social workers' relative 'invisibility' in current service developments in prevention and early intervention. The importance of valuing and recognising the particular contribution of social work in producing better outcomes for children and families and efforts to combat the continuing negative image of social work and its impact on the workforce are recommended.

Key words: Children's services; Social workers; PQ training

Introduction and background

In the light of current developments in children's services and an increasing emphasis on workforce reform and development (see DCSF, 2008), it is pertinent to consider the significance and role of PQ training in supporting competent and reflective social work practice with children

and families. It is in this context that the study, on which this article is based, was undertaken.

Post Qualifying training in children and families' social work
General post qualifying training opportunities for social workers had existed for a number of years but it was not until 1999 that the Department of Health (DOH) introduced a part-time award route specifically targeted at social workers experienced in children and families' work, funded through the Social Services Training Support Programme. The new award was to be delivered via university and employer partnerships (designated by the DOH as 'centres of excellence') and the award programmes they developed were approved by the then Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW), now the General Social Care Council (GSCC). The content of the award had to be based on national occupational standards for child care workers at the post-qualifying level (TOPSS, 2000) and meet the national requirements for the award (CCETSW, 2000).

The long term goal for the award was to 'have a supply of trained staff who, by virtue of having gained this child care PQ award, will be able to provide a high quality service to children and families in order to bring about optimal outcomes for children' (Department of Health, 1999, paragraph 3 of the information pack). The Department of Health's main target was to have 7000 social workers trained in the award by March 2006, 10% of whom should have been working in residential care and the Department even envisaged that 'in due time certain child care roles may be reserved to staff who have the approved qualification' (ibid). In fact, these targets were never realised, the GSCC Social Work Education Assuring Quality report for 2006 *Social Work Education and Training in England: listening, learning, shaping,* for example, providing evidence that, at best, about 500 awards across the 18 programmes were achieved in each of the years 2003, 2004 and 2005 (GSCC, 2006).

Eight pilot PQ Child Care programmes (PQCCA) were set up, starting in 2000, with a further 10 programmes approved, commencing from 2001 onwards. It was never clear what the long term future of the award would be and, in the event, it was overtaken by the introduction of new arrangements for the whole of post-qualifying social work education and training (GSCC, 2005a). These arrangements consist of new levels of PQ training (at specialist, higher specialist and advanced levels) and the introduction of new kinds of awards in, for example, adult care, mental health social work and practice education. These awards follow the model of the PQCCA, in terms of requirements for employer-university partnerships, their part-time mode of delivery and linkages to relevant National Occupational Standards. Thus PQCCA programme partnerships were, if they chose to, relatively easily able to revalidate their courses within the new framework, course content and assessment processes remaining largely the same (GSCC, 2005b). Nevertheless, the PQCCA in its original format is no more, with most PQCCA having 6 or 7 intakes between 2000 and 2006/7.

The West Yorkshire PQ Child Care Programme and the purposes of the survey
The West Yorkshire PQ Child Care Award programme (PQCCA) ran from January 2001 until 2007, with the last intake welcomed in January 2006. Developed in response to the nationally identified need to improve standards of child care social work and hence improve outcomes for

children living in the community and looked after, the overall aim of the programme was to contribute to the raising of standards in post qualifying child care social work practice within the West Yorkshire region. The programme was managed by the West Yorkshire PQCCA partnership which comprised three universities and 6 statutory employers[1]. Qualified social workers, experienced in children and families' work, from any statutory, voluntary and private organisations were able to access the programme, with employer support or self-funding, although by far the majority of students were seconded from the partner agencies. The course, which also led to an academic Post Graduate Diploma in Child Welfare and Protection, was delivered over one calendar year, on a part-time (day a week) basis. The course comprised four modules, three of them covering child care law and policy; child development, assessment and planning; and evidence based practice and managing the professional task. The fourth (practice) module, required students to demonstrate their competence in relation to the national practice requirements and values for the award (CCETSW, 2000) and involved the preparation of a portfolio of evidence and direct observation of their practice by an approved practice assessor.

Throughout the life of the programme various evaluations were undertaken, including annual module and programme evaluations, all of which provided generally very positive feedback about the quality of the course content and delivery. However, with the PQCCA's demise, it was agreed by the programme partnership that a final survey would be undertaken, in 2007, of those who had completed the programme successfully. The survey would have two purposes. Firstly, we would be asking PQCCA holders about their post hoc evaluations of their PQ training opportunity and about their work status before and after completing their PQCCA. Secondly, we wanted to capitalise on the fact that the PQCCA was delivered in a period which was characterised by major changes in government policy and thinking about the organisation and delivery of children's services post the Victoria Climbié inquiry and report (Laming, 2003), leading to the introduction of the *Every Child Matters* programme (accessible at http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/) and the implementation of the Children Act 2004. The views of those accessing and achieving the PQCCA during this period should, we thought, provide an interesting commentary not only on their experience of PQ training but also on the changes that were beginning to unfold during this period, and likely to affect their working practices and their roles as children and families' social workers.

The survey described here comprises one of only two known published attempts to seek the views of students on the PQCCA and, later on in this article, our findings are compared with those of the other published study by Gupta and Blewett (2007). It is worth noting that it was understood by those partnerships delivering the PQCCA that the DOH would be commissioning an evaluation of its outcomes nationally but this never occurred, something which can be viewed as a lost opportunity, particularly given that such an evaluation could have usefully informed recent reviews of the role and tasks of social workers and current workforce developments, to which we refer later in the article.

At the point of setting up the survey we had only limited expectations as to what we would uncover. As regards our first aim of obtaining PQ holders' evaluations of the PQCCA some while after completing their studies, we hoped that respondents would continue to find value in the programme of teaching and learning to which they had been exposed and which they had had to complete part-time whilst also pursuing busy and demanding social work jobs. However, we

rather expected to find that many would have used their PQCCA/Post Graduate Diploma to further their careers, getting promoted into management and out of front line practice. While having skilled managers is essential, the PQCCA was not a management-focused course and its purpose, as indicated by the DOH (1999), was to enhance direct practice with children and families.

In relation to our second aim, of gathering respondents' views on their current work situations generally, we had in mind issues which are regularly debated in journal articles and books about child and families' social work; issues to do with the nature of the work, its stresses and complexities, the availability of resources, time spent with service users, the quality of supervision and management, the value of IT innovations and increased accountability and the public image of the profession itself. However, as regards the most recent changes occurring immediately pre and post the Victoria Climbié case (Laming, 2003), there was little or no published research available to influence our expectations about responses to the relevant questions in the questionnaire. The changes were, and still are, in the process of being rolled out and major evaluation studies of the new initiatives had yet to report. Government departments are upbeat about the benefits of the *Every Child Matters* programme and about the new service delivery arrangements heralded by the Children Act 2004, but we wanted to obtain the views of those 'on the front line' about if and how these developments were impacting on their work practices.

Methodology
The survey was conducted electronically using the Bristol Online Survey method (accessible at https://www.survey.bris.ac.uk/), for which the University of Huddersfield has a licence and which allows respondents to contribute anonymously. The online questionnaire included 20 questions, set out in four sections eliciting information on the characteristics of the respondents and their employment circumstances pre and post their PQCCA, their views in hindsight on the PQCCA, their current level of satisfaction at work and their knowledge and understanding of the *Every Child Matters* agenda, including their views on its current and likely impacts on their work. A copy of the questions which were uploaded into the electronic survey format, is included as Appendix A.

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected via questions which allowed respondents to score or rate their level of agreement or disagreement with the categories or statements that were provided and, where appropriate, space was provided for additional comment. As regards analysis, the quantitative data generated were summarised, using percentages, and then these data, together with the qualitative data, were independently analysed by two of the authors who then compared their analyses, with a view to identifying common themes in respondents' replies.

A database of last known e-mail addresses for the total population of 123 award holders was constructed and, following piloting of the survey with three PQCCA holders from different work settings, the online survey was opened to respondents in the early part of 2007, with a closing date in mid summer 2007. All possible respondents were e-mailed and invited to take part in the survey and they were provided with the electronic link to the survey site. By way of reward, all potential respondents were promised a copy of the full summary report of the findings, which

is also available from the contact author at h.c.masson@hud.ac.uk What follows is an outline of the key findings from the survey.

Findings

As with most surveys by postal or online questionnaire (Robson, 2002), the response rate was relatively modest which means that the results have to be treated with caution as they may not be fully representative of the total population of PQCCA completers on the programme, nor of students on the other seventeen PQCCA programmes. Nevertheless, those who did reply were broadly representative of the total sample of PQCCA holders from the West Yorkshire programme in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, date of completion of the programme and years of experience. Specifically, the results set out below are based on 51 responses out of the total population of 123 successful PQCCA candidates across all 6 years of the programme (a 41% response rate). Forty respondents (79%) were female and 11 (21%) were male. Eight respondents (16%) described their ethnic background as black, Asian or dual heritage, the remainder (84%) categorising themselves as either white British or white European. All were aged over 25 years of age, with the majority (36 or 71%) aged between 36 and 55 years of age, with 37 (72%) of those replying having obtained their original social work qualification before 2000. Both in terms of age and year of completion of their original social work qualification, then, the respondents were a very experienced group of social work staff.

Four clear themes emerged from the survey and these are outlined below.

Employment stability, front line practice and increased specialism

At the point of commencing their PQCCA, 45 respondents (88%) had been working in a local authority (social services) department. Post-qualifying, a very similar proportion (41 or 80%) remained in local authority children and families' social work, with very small numbers employed elsewhere, in another statutory agency, in the voluntary sector or in the private/independent sector. One respondent had retired and one had left social work altogether.

When asked to indicate their job title pre and post the PQCCA, it became clear that the majority remained in front line social work posts, although a number had been promoted into more senior practitioner or specialist posts. Thus, at the time of the survey, of those 49 respondents still in social work, 28 respondents (57%) were in front-line social work posts (as compared with 42 or 82% pre their PQCCA), 10 (20%) were working as principal or senior social workers, 8 (16%) described themselves as managers, one respondent had become an extended schools coordinator and two were reviewing officers. However, notwithstanding these changes in work pattern, 29 of our respondents (57%) reported that they had not changed jobs since commencing the PQCCA and 21 (41%) had had only 1 or 2 job changes.

When asked to describe the nature of their work post PQCCA, respondents were less likely than before doing their PQCCA to describe themselves as being involved in 'general longer term children and families' work' and more likely to locate themselves in 'other' specialist services such as children with disabilities' work, family assessment and specialist support services' work, reflecting perhaps the changing arrangements in the delivery of children's services and the related emphasis on integrated, multi-disciplinary teams. However, pre and post their PQCCA very small

and consistent numbers were involved in work with looked after children or children leaving care, or in adoption and fostering services.

So, in summary and somewhat contrary to our expectations, a picture emerged of our respondents largely remaining in front-line practice, albeit in perhaps more senior and specialist kinds of work, with by far the majority remaining in local authority employment. It appeared that they had not used their PQ qualification to advance their career via management but were continuing to work directly with children and families.

The benefits of PQ training for competence and confidence

Respondents were overwhelmingly positive about their PQCCA, 48 or 94% agreeing with the statement 'I am pleased that I undertook the qualification'. However, when asked about their reasons for this evaluation, respondents' replies were not only couched in terms of what having the award meant for their future career prospects, but even more so in terms of how post-qualifying training had improved their knowledge and skills, their confidence levels and their overall commitment to doing a professional job.

More specifically, whilst 35 or 68% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that undertaking the PQCCA had 'improved my career prospects', 48 (94%) strongly agreed or agreed that the programme had 'made me more critically reflective' and 47 (92%) strongly agreed or agreed that it had 'had a positive impact on my practice competence'. At the same time, 45 or 88% strongly agreed or agreed that the PQCCA had 'made me a more committed learner' and 40 (78%) strongly agreed or agreed that the programme had 'made me pay more attention to the legal and policy context of my work'. Having the opportunity to recharge batteries, update knowledge and skills and increased confidence were also evident in supplementary comments provided by various respondents. The following are illustrative:

> I feel I am better prepared and able to do my job much more confidently. My knowledge and practice have been updated and improved.

> I very much enjoyed the PQCCA and the opportunity it afforded me to reflect upon my practice, to try and improve outcomes for my service users. The amount of study time built into the course was invaluable in securing this time away from the 'grindstone'.

> I am certainly more critically reflective in all my work. More confident in ensuring I work to social work values. Assessment work is stronger and more professional. I am generally a more confident social worker.

Work satisfaction, child centred family focused work and making a difference

Turning to the findings from the section C of the questionnaire (see Appendix A), 38 respondents (75%) agreed that overall they were very satisfied or satisfied with their work situation and that they had made the right career choice (with only 4% disagreeing with the

statement and the rest choosing the neither agreeing nor disagreeing option). When those expressing overall satisfaction with their work were asked to indicate their reasons for their evaluation, there was clear evidence of an overall commitment to working with and improving the lives of children and families and that their satisfaction arose from making a positive difference. Thus, comments included:

> I believe that this was a right career choice for me as I believe that I have made some difference in the life of children and families through my work.

> I still feel I can offer an effective service in the area of child protection, which is the main emphasis of my work. Unlike many of my colleagues I have not suffered from 'burn out' as a result of working in this area because I feel positive about protecting children and reuniting them with their families wherever possible.

> I am still motivated to improving the life chances of people. I may feel jaded sometimes by the work, but when I reflect on the cause it is usually the organisational restraints, and not the actual work, and I can't imagine doing anything else!

> It's lovely when you can support people to change things and make a small but meaningful difference to their life - even the most challenging and difficult cases can offer this. Also, if a child can no longer be cared for within their family, I am confident that I have made every effort to ensure this is a last and most positive step. Whatever conflict there is, people respect openness and honesty within professional boundaries.

Notwithstanding the above, when respondents were asked for their levels of agreement or disagreement with a series of statements about work now, some interesting and somewhat contrasting findings emerged. In terms of their direct practice, 38 or 74% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they were now more able to meet service users' needs than when they first came in to the work, although 36 (70%) strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that they were spending less time with service users now than previously. 39 respondents (76%) strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that children and families' social work had become more complex during the previous 10 years and the same number of respondents also strongly agreed or agreed that multi-agency and multi-disciplinary work had become more effective over the previous decade.

In terms of pressure, 48 or 94% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that stresses placed on managers and practitioners in children and families' work had increased in the last 10 years but 86% were neutral about or disagreed with the statement that the public image of what children and families' social workers do has improved in recent years. There was also considerable ambivalence about whether the quality of supervision offered staff was better or worse than previously, about the impact of IT innovations, about the value of current management practices in improving staffs' ability to achieve good outcomes for children and families and about whether there were more resources to call on than 10 years ago.

Changes in work practices

In relation to the questions in section D of the questionnaire, 43 respondents (or 84%) considered themselves to be well informed or quite well informed about the *Every Child Matters* agenda but they were understandably unsure about the likely impact of the changes being rolled out. When asked to identify three differences in the way they 'do' social work now, as compared when they first started their career, positive aspects often identified by respondents related to their greater levels of confidence (mentioned by 15 respondents), their increased ability to pursue service user-focused work (mentioned by 10 respondents), and a welcomed increase in cross-service and multi-disciplinary working (10 respondents). On a less positive note, by far and away the most mentioned changes in work practices related to what respondents variously described as increases in information technology, paperwork, recording and management bureaucracy. These aspects combined were referred to by 37 respondents, often in at least ambivalent if not negative terms, particularly when it was felt that such changes were impacting negatively on their ability to provide a social work service to children and families. Thus, their comments included the following:

> Increasing paperwork and time on the computer, taking away from direct work with children and families.

> No use of IT when first a social worker. IT is now used in every aspect of my work. This has been a mixed blessing. Improved communication and ability to manage own administration. But information sharing systems and electronic records are a nightmare.

> The ICS computer system has meant that a larger proportion of time is spent on entering information and sat before my computer. It is impossible not to do this task and therefore there is less time available for direct pieces of work with families, this work is now referred on to family support workers.

> I have more paperwork and administration to do than ever and the system used by my LA does not facilitate less work or a quicker method of recording. Please note that I am not computer phobic - it is just a poor system.

> Feels like I spend a lot of time tied to the computer replying to e-mails, completing paper work when I should be carrying out home visits.

> Good competent direct work with children has become a rare commodity as social work becomes increasingly bureaucratised.

> Level of IT has vastly increased, to the detriment of case working. It seems strange, and a waste of a scarce resource, for me to spend 70% of my time as a typist.

What emerges from this brief outline of key themes arising out of the data is a picture of a group of social workers who remain strongly committed to and satisfied with their profession and the work they do with and on behalf of children and families. The majority remain in direct work with service users, as opposed to using PQ training primarily as a way into management and virtually everyone who responded greatly valued their PQ training in terms of their increased knowledge, skills, competence and confidence and as part of continuing professional development. They were aware of changes in work practices since the turn of the century and whilst welcoming some

aspects, such as increased multi-agency working, there were concerns about other aspects which were perceived to be affecting their ability to provide a social work service.

Discussion
In this section of the article we discuss the findings from the survey in relation to two aspects: firstly, PQ training and its value in the continuing professional development of qualified children and families' social workers within an integrated workforce and, secondly, what the findings about satisfaction with work and current work practices might suggest about whether the best use of social workers is being made in the current children's services.

PQ training and its role in maintaining and enhancing direct work with children and families
For the respondents in our survey, undertaking their PQCCA was reported by them to have been a very positive experience, in terms of their increased levels of confidence, their enhanced practice competence, and their commitment both to continuing professional development and to improving outcomes for children and their families. For these social workers at least, it would appear that the DOH's aspirations for the award were realised, although the national target numbers for those achieving the award were never met and anecdotal evidence suggests that the numbers accessing the various levels of child care awards within the GSCC's new PQ Framework are modest, with employers often unable to second staff due to resource and/or operational constraints.

The current emphasis placed on the quality of the workforce could hardly be more powerfully stated when it is commented in the *Children's Plan* (DCSF, 2007b, p10):

> The single most important factor in delivering our aspirations for children is a world class workforce able to provide highly personalised support, so we will continue to drive up quality and capacity of those working in the children's workforce.

It is argued here that, if we are serious about maintaining and improving the skills and competence of social workers as the above quote suggests we should be, in order for them to make a real contribution to meeting these aspirations, then much more emphasis must be placed on formal and significant post qualifying training opportunities. Increased funding to improve access is required, as well as the kinds of continuing professional development requirements which pertain in the case of doctors and other health practitioners who wish to maintain their professional registration being put in place. *Building Brighter Futures* (DCSF, 2008) has outlined a number of initiatives arising from the investment of £73 million in the future of the social work profession. However, these initiatives are mainly directed at assisting in the recruitment of more people into the profession, improving qualifying training and better support for newly qualified social workers. These goals are all to be applauded but although the report refers to the development and piloting of an on-going professional development framework, the main thrust of the document is about support of new entrants to the profession and staff just qualified. More investment in post qualifying opportunities is an urgent requirement.

Social work roles and tasks and the delivery of children's services
In this part of the discussion it is argued that various issues raised by our respondents, including the poor image of social work, the impact of information technology, increased administrative demands and management bureaucracy in the new children's services, are detracting from those

aspects of social work which bring people into the profession in the first place and which provide them with the most work satisfaction: working with children families to make a positive difference in their lives. We also argue that social work's traditional role and credentials in early intervention and preventative work are being neglected in the new service delivery arrangements when, in fact, social workers could be making a valuable contribution, alongside other professional disciplines.

In relation to our respondents' views on their current work situations, similar issues emerged from a study involving a series of focus groups with 46 social workers who were students on the London Post Qualifying Child Care Award programme, carried out by Gupta and Blewett (2007). The authors identified four main recurring themes in student responses: (1) the image of social work; (2) bureaucracy; (3) professional authority; and (4) defensive/reflective practice.

As regards the image of social work, there was a universal belief that the dominant image of social work was a negative one, something which is also clear in studies of the media reporting of social work (Franklin and Parton, 2001). This was seen as contributing to low morale and a sense of not being valued. Secondly, paperwork and the inputting of data into management information systems was seen by Gupta and Blewett's participants as dominating the work, which left insufficient time for building relationships with children and families – the primary motive for entering the profession. Thirdly, and closely connected, the participating social workers felt there was a threat to professional authority posed by the increasing dominance of performance targets and resource-led decision-making at the expense of child-focused assessments and interventions. This connected with the fourth theme, for while the participants recognized the importance of developing critical reflection and evidence-based practice, this was not always possible in the current context. For example, most participants experienced supervision as a task-focused, management-led process, where there was little space to critically analyze or reflect.

Gupta and Blewett argue that it is vital to change the organizational culture, from one which is obsessed with audit and form-filling, to one which recognizes the key relational elements of the work and the contribution of social work to a much broader and more preventative role. This is an argument which is receiving support in a number of quarters (see, for example, Ruch, 2005; Wilson *et al.*, 2008), which is reflected in a range of research studies, including our own, and which figures prominently in the GSCC's *Social Work at its Best. A Statement of Social Work Roles and Tasks for the 21st Century* (2008) although this has been a little publicised document.

Two literature reviews commissioned to inform the General Social Care Council project on the roles and tasks of social work are of particular interest in relation to the above discussion. The first literature review was derived from the mainstream professional and policy literature (Blewett *et al.*, 2007) and the other was based upon service users' perspectives (Beresford, *Shaping Our Lives*, 2007). Both reviews underlined the importance of the relational aspects of the work. The research on the views and experiences of service users is particularly instructive; for while the research reviews suggest that social workers now undertake less direct support and face-to-face work, this is precisely what service users most value. While they valued the wide range of approaches used by social workers and the breadth of tasks undertaken, they placed particular importance on social work's 'social' approach, the emphasis on the relationship, and the positive

personal qualities they associate with social workers. The latter included warmth, respect, being non-judgmental, listening, treating people equally, being trustworthy, open and honest, reliable and communicating well (Beresford, *Shaping Our Lives*, 2007, pp.5-6). This all seems rather different from the increasingly distant, procedure-bound role identified by our survey participants and those in the Gupta and Blewett study. Service users welcome a 'hands on' approach which takes account of both personal and social issues and their complex relationships. It seems that it is this which defines the core of social work and which makes it distinctive from other professions.

Both social workers and service users see social work as an essentially human rather than a technical or scientific activity. It is primarily about talking to or communicating with each other and is more likely to be successful when carried out in partnership and with the maximum participation of all parties. This is not simply saying that good social work is only about establishing relationships, but studies which attempt to identify what service users find helpful repeatedly identify this as a necessary component.

What was somewhat surprising in our study was that while participants were unhappy about a number of work-related developments a high proportion remained satisfied or very satisfied with their career choice and there was continuing commitment to working with and improving the lives of children and families. Similar findings are evident in other studies on work satisfaction and stress (see, for example, Stalker *et al.*, 2007). It seems the key factor in finding satisfaction in child welfare work, even in poor work contexts and situations of emotional exhaustion, is that one believes that one is really helping vulnerable children and making a positive difference. It seems this was a major factor why our respondents remained in front-line practice.

In relation social work's role within current prevention and early intervention agendas, it is somewhat ironic that while it has been failures in the area of child protection which have provided the major vehicle for criticisms of social work and social workers over the past 35 years, it is child protection and other areas of 'statutory' responsibility which continue to be seen as core to the work. This was made explicit in *Every Child Matters: Change for Children in Social Care* (Department for Education and Skills, 2004) when it stated that:

> Social workers and social care workers need to be at the heart of the Every Child Matters Change for Children Programme. You play a central role in trying to improve the outcomes for the most vulnerable through your work with children in need including those in need of protection, children who are looked after and disabled children (DfES, 2004, p.2).

However, although a key priority of policy development since 1997 has been in terms of the importance of prioritising prevention and early intervention (Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 2003; Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), 2007a and b), most of these developments have taken place outside the remit of mainstream local authority social workers. The main drivers have been Sure Start and Children's Fund projects and more recently Children's Centres. The net result of the changes is that, rather than providing social work with an opportunity to re-establish the vision of a generic community-based preventative service set out by the Seebohm Report (1968) of 40 years ago, the role and tasks of social workers being

established in the new departments of children's services tie them even more into narrow statutory and very formalized work, including interventions with children and families where there is abuse and where children and young people are looked-after. Such work had become the hallmark, for a number of years, in the old social service departments (Jordan and Jordan, 2000), leading to the kinds of negative consequences on social work practice which were raised by respondents in our survey and in the Gupta and Blewett study (2007).

This failure to identify a central role for social work in the new initiatives to enhance prevention and early intervention is particularly surprising in the context of the priority currently being given to the importance of trying to address the problems of 'hard to reach', 'high risk' families caught in a cycle of low achievement (Cabinet Office, Social Exclusion Task Force, 2007) and where all professionals are now encouraged to 'think family' (Cabinet Office, Social Exclusion Unit, 2008). This is the traditional terrain in which social workers have operated for many years (Cree and Davis, 2007) but which is now being inhabited by a whole variety of new and not-so-new professional groups and agencies. It would seem to be short-sighted not to capitalise also on social workers' expertise in work with disadvantaged and vulnerable children and families in these aspects of social intervention.

Conclusion
The main thrust of the current policy agenda for children's services locates social work as part of the newly emergent integrated workforce for children and young people but whilst integration is emphasised there is recognition that the children's workforce remains made up of a range of professions with their own discreet workforce development issues.
Recent publications demonstrate a level of state interest in the renewal and 'modernisation' of the social work profession which is to be welcomed but the central role of post-qualifying training in boosting skills and securing a positive professional identity for social workers, which is clear from the survey findings outlined in this article, must be supported and developed.

In addition, and as has also been argued here, a key challenge for the profession is to maintain a focus on the human, relational aspects of practice, both in relation to prevention and early intervention work (in which social workers appear to be playing a marginal role at present) and within their typical work context which our respondents describe as an increasingly bureaucratic and regulated environment.

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