Bournemouth University Research Online (BURO)

This is an author-deposited version published in: http://eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk

Date deposited in repository: 2008-01-03

EPrints ID: 1205

To cite this version:
Parker, J., 2007. Developing effective practice learning for tomorrow's social workers. Social Work Education. (In Press)

Developing effective practice learning for tomorrow's social workers

Jonathan Parker

January 2006
6579 words

ProfessorJonathan Parker BA, MA, CQSW, ILTM, FRSA

Professor of Social Work

Bournemouth University

Institute of Health and Community Studies

4th Floor, Royal London House

Bournemouth

BH1 3LT

UK

parkerj@bournemouth.ac.uk

Jonathan Parker is Professor of Social Work at Bournemouth University, UK. He has particular interests in social work education, practice learning, theories for social work and dementia care.

Developing effective practice learning for tomorrow's social workers

Abstract

This paper considers some of the changes in social work education in the UK particularly focusing on practice learning in England. The changes and developments are briefly identified and examined in the context of what we know about practice learning. The paper presents some findings from a small scale qualitative study of key stakeholders involved in practice learning and education in social work and their perceptions of these anticipated changes, which are revisited at implementation. The implications for practice learning are discussed.

Key words

Practice learning, social work education, modernising agenda

Developing effective practice learning for tomorrow's social workers

Since 1997, and the coming to power of the New Labour government, the social and health care sector has been subject to significant change in the UK under the auspices of a 'modernising' agenda which characterises current social policy ideology and concerns striving for public service improvement through increased regulation, inspection and monitoring. Social work education has also undergone a major transformation, the intention being to enhance the quality of practice and competence of practitioners.

This paper focuses on the perceptions of effective practice learning in UK social work education in the context of anticipated changes. The paper reports on a small scale analysis of stakeholder views of changes to practice learning introduced by the new social work qualification. These views are revisited at implementation by those experiencing the changes and implications for developing practice learning are considered.

Research into practice learning

According to Rai (2004) social work education has always emphasised the importance of field experience within the curriculum for preparing students for practice; the purpose being to contextualise classroom learning. Valentine (2004: 3) concurs, suggesting it is 'the place where theory, ethics, and skill come together to inform the professional judgments social work practitioners make'. Regehr *et al.* (2002: 56) state that practice learning provides 'the primary opportunity for students to integrate knowledge, values and skills into their professional self-concepts'. Fortune, McCarthy and Abramson (2001) agree seeing practice learning or field education as the place in which college-based learning confronts practice reality and is synthesised into professional social work (see also Parker, 2004; Doel and Shardlow, 2005).

A number of approaches to practice learning have been identified throughout its history such as an apprenticeship model, academic approach, therapeutic

or growth model and latterly an articulated model (Shardlow and Doel, 2006). However, Caspi and Reid (2002) note that there is a lack of coherent and agreed procedures for delivering effective practice learning experiences. They recognise three categories which operate in practice learning: structure , content and process. Structure refers to the fixed arrangements of practice learning which may involve a single student placed with a named supervisor but may also refer to block, concurrent, delayed-entry, group approaches, task, secondary and team approaches or field units. In the UK, the broad arrangements for practice learning are set by specified requirements for social work education (Department of Health, 2002). The content of practice learning relates to the articulation of a set of objectives at various stages of the learning process, or what needs to be achieved and learned. In the UK, this is associated with and driven by the various specified requirements, benchmarks and standards, which reflect those aspects of learning that must be covered within the professional award. The process of practice learning refers to the phases of the learning and teaching experience, most of which are student focused and include andragogical and adult sensitive approaches, feminist pedagogy and blended teaching approaches which use a combination of pedagogy and adult learning principles. It is the processes that determine successful outcome or otherwise.

Regehr *et al.* (2002) consider goal setting and clarity to be important in the process of establishing the content for practice learning. Encouraging self-assessment and development is important in their model, with the supervisor or practice teacher being responsible for encouraging and assessing learning summatively. They present a negotiated model of setting learning goals and evaluating these in a systematic way over the course of the placement. The negotiated aspect of the model recognises that each practice learning experience is unique in respect of the agency and opportunities available and in respect of student learning needs not simply something which is externally imposed and regulated.

Important to an effective practice learning experience is student satisfaction which appears to be associated with regular feedback about performance, feeling empowered as a learner with a degree of autonomy and opportunities to observe work with constructive role models (Bogo, Globerman and Sussman, 2004). Dissatisfaction is associated with a lack of clear expectations, relationship difficulties between student and supervisor and a lack of integration between theory and practice (see Marsh and Triseliotis, 1996). Whilst this provides an indication of satisfaction and may assist us in developing experiences that are appreciated, it does not provide clear systematic evidence of effectiveness from all parties or, indeed, clarity of purpose. However, as we have seen above, it is commonly assumed that practice learning is necessary to enable students to integrate theory into practice and contextualise learning. It is the forum in which the beginning professional develops core skills and competence and a critical and reflective approach. The importance of practice learning has been recognised in the UK, as a means of producing safe practitioners and inculcating multidisciplinary and statutory working (Department of Health, 2002).

The needs of minority students are also recognised as increasingly important in developing successful practice learning experiences. For example, in supporting black and minority ethnic students the development of open dialogue, mentoring, and support for black and minority ethnic practice teachers is highlighted (Cropper, 2000; Singh, 2006). Also, addressing the needs of students with disabilities in practice learning is assisted positively by robust planning, adjustment to meet individual needs and continued monitoring and support (Manthorpe and Stanley, 1999; Sapey et al., 2004; Wray et al., 2005). These responses reflect good practice across the range of practice learning experiences.

Caspi and Reid (2002: 56) suggest that learning is best when it is broken into manageable parts, varied, is clearly structured and directed, and based on the

principles of dialogue central to adult learning. They qualify this, however, by reminding us that we know little about what works:

> Field instruction largely goes on behind closed doors. Little research has been done to uncover what occurs behind those doors. Indeed, not much is known about what works and what does not in field instruction..., or about which behaviors are most successful in achieving objectives of professional competence and identity...' (Caspi and Reid, 2002: 36).

The majority of studies on positive outcomes in field education focus on field instructor behaviours, field instructor and student relationship; the range and nature of educational or learning opportunities; structured and models for practice learning and interorganisational relationships between universities and field settings (Bogo *et al.*, 2002, Gambrill 2002; Parker 2005). Fortune *et al.* (2001) review a range of studies that also consider supervision and agency climate as important in enhancing student performance in practice learning. Changes are seen to occur throughout practice learning in student perceptions of improved learning and the supervisor's skills. Knight (2001) found that introductory and clarificatory activities, whilst appreciated at the outset, were replaced by activities that helped students to develop self-critical skills and linking theory and practice at the end of the practice learning. Maidment (2000) would suggest, however, the student and practice teacher perceptions of the effectiveness and validity of methods used by the practice teacher may not always be congruent.

Maidment (2003) questioned the adequacy of preparation for practice learning and suggested, on the basis of her research, that social work programmes need to teach students how to survive and negotiate in workplace cultures and not only the traditional interview and assessment skills. Maidment sent a 58-item questionnaire to 48 third year students, 41 fourth year students to complete at the end of their field placement – 48%

and 39% response rate respectively. The questionnaire covered demographic information, placement allocation and communication, teaching and learning and agency context. In the results, she found that 31% of respondents reported verbal abuse from clients, 28% travelled long distances, 38% experienced conflict within the agency and 62% experienced considerable work-based stress (using subjective perceptions). This suggests that health and safety and stress preparation was essential for students undertaking practice learning. Parker (2005) concurred in his exploration of self-efficacy beliefs of student social workers.

Bogo *et al*. (2002) recognise the centrality of practice learning in the formation of social workers but acknowledge the lack of standardised outcome measures for assessing learning and performance. Whilst they acknowledge that some students fail their field education, the reasons, other than clear ethical breaches and professional unsuitability, are unclear. The outcome measures used to evaluate practice learning include student performance and, more commonly, student satisfaction or perceptions of helpfulness. Bogo *et al*. were concerned that few studies evaluated the reliability and validity of measurement tools. Their conception of practice learning is one of competence based education for practice and, therefore, open to measurement. However, they recognised the difficulties involved in developing measures of competence because of the difficulties in identifying core social work skills and learning objectives beyond the micro level interviewing skills and how multiple dimensions could be incorporated, the need for scaling techniques measuring the quality of performance and determining what data provides evidence. It may be argued that the development of National Occupational Standards for Social Workers in England goes someway to address this problem (Topss, 2002).

Bogo *et al*. (2002) studied the development of student competence across multiple dimensions of social work indicating their view that effective practice

learning concerns the inculcation of competent practice across multiple skills dimensions in student social workers.

Shardlow and Doel (1996) recognise these practical and conceptual differences in assessing competence and see it inextricably linked with methods of learning and teaching used. Recognising the diverse and complex nature of practice learning, Doel and Shardlow (2005) consider learning to be something done best in a climate in which it is safe to take risks and learning is facilitating by doing, by live teaching and simulated practice. It is the practice teacher who is pivotal to this learning arrangement but as an active player engaged him- or herself in the learning process. In the UK, this is generally a practitioner employed by a social work agency who acts as supervisor, teacher and assessor and recommends to the university that the student pass or fail their placement.

Whilst the importance of practice learning is recognised within the literature and seen as the locus in which theory and practice come together, studies reflect diverse positions and indicate that research into effective field education is still in its infancy. Current research identifies the centrality of a clear purpose and aims, relevant challenging opportunities, structured learning and negotiated approaches based on the development of mutually beneficial relationships. There is a clear need to begin to capture a wider stakeholder perspective and systematically consider how we might develop effective approaches to practice learning that respond to current policy shifts and workforce agendas whilst inculcating a critical perspective and engagement with these views.

Changes in social work and social care in the UK
Modernisation and change characterises health and social work in the UK. Emphasis has been placed on increased regulation as a means of better protecting service users and carers and workforce issues are considered in the context of increased control (Department of Health, 1998). The Care

Standards Act 2000 promotes standards as a way of improving social work and social care by the regulation of services and the protection of the title 'social worker'. These changes reflect a political drive to raise quality and to develop an evidence base to promote best practice in public services and reflect the view that monitoring, regulation and inspection represent one way of achieving these ends.

In social work education, significant changes have also taken place, culminating in the reform of the qualifying award for social work and its replacement with country-specific qualifications which are undertaken at least at honours degree level. The broad criteria and requirements for social work qualifying education in England were set out by the Department of Health (2002). The GSCC, which replaced the former professional body the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) in England, devolved award giving powers to the universities, operating, instead, a system of accreditation of universities to grant degrees in social work (GSCC, 2002a). A degree of control (distal rather than proximal) is exerted and maintained through the regional inspectorate function and education and training brief which places extra requirements for external examiners and universities in the reporting and monitoring requirements set out within accreditation criteria (GSCC, 2002a). This is a complex system and further details can be found on the GSCC website (www.gscc.co.uk). Changes in social work education have been long awaited in the UK and the move to a graduate profession is welcome.

In England, the Department of Health (2002) requirements for social work education contain two specific elements that relate to practice learning in a relatively short document. These elements specify that programme providers must ensure that social work students spend at least 200 days overall in practice learning in at least two settings, experience statutory social work tasks involving legal interventions and providing services to at least two service user groups. There is no other prescription as to how individual

universities divide the number of days or the number of practice learning opportunities and a range of different models and approaches have been developed including networked opportunities in which students are hosted by one agency but undertake learning in different settings (see Doel et al., 2004; Doel, 2005).

A major emphasis in the previous qualifying award, the Diploma in Social Work, concerned the role of the practice teacher who, as mentioned earlier, is a practitioner who makes recommendations to university departments concerning the competence of students to practise. CCETSW envisaged all practice teachers being qualified award holders. This was never realised and now the standards for practice teachers and assessors is again coming under scrutiny. The Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) suggesting minimum requirements at different levels (Kearney, 2003), and the GSCC post qualifying framework continues the emphasis on embedding a pedagogical role into social work practice (GSCC, 2005) but there may be a pragmatic approach developing in which a range of different qualifications are being considered for the role (Parker and Whitfield, 2006).

Challenges
The devolution of responsibilities for qualifying awards in social work to the universities has created a challenge to develop programmes in the ways each sees fit and which play to institutional strengths as long as they meet the requirements of the accreditation process (GSCC, 2002a), the criteria for training, in England delineated by the Department of Health (2002), and reflect the standards enshrined in the Code of Practice (GSCC, 2002b), the National Occupational Standards (Topss England, 2002), value bases and the higher education subject benchmark criteria (QAA, 2000). Choices to meet these challenges are constrained by external regulations and requirements. There are also internal constraints affecting choice in higher education in the UK as debates concerning funding and top-up fees continue. Practice learning and its assessment, although undertaken within the work setting, remain 'the

responsibility of the university in terms of approval, commissioning and monitoring' (GSCC, 2002a: 12). So, responsibility is imposed within a regulated framework.

An immediate challenge for practice learning in social work education is to ensure that there are sufficient numbers of practice learning opportunities and practice teachers. The Practice Learning Taskforce has indicated that an increase of 106% in practice learning days is needed to meet demand by 2006 (Topss England/Taskforce, 2004). For students, the challenges extend to matters of finance given the prolonged time spent on the programme and reduced opportunities to supplement their income by working. The corresponding challenge for educators and partner agencies is to ensure the commitment to learning.

Methodology

The sample for the present study was purposive and participants from three stakeholder groups with an interest in practice learning were asked, after the study was explained to them, if they would like to take part in semi-structured interviews concerning their views on changes occurring in practice learning (See Silverman, 2005; Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006). Participants were free to withdraw consent at any time. Whilst students have been included in this study, service users and carers and social work managers have not. The present study is limited, therefore, in that not all relevant stakeholders have participated but the stakeholders involved acknowledged in part the plurality of perspectives that need to be taken into account in practice learning in social work.

Participants were drawn from those who arrange, manage and support practice learning opportunities, practice teachers and students undertaking practice learning in social work. Three practice teachers (PT), all of whom were female, took part. Two of the practice teachers worked within a practice learning unit attached to a university and the third worked in the voluntary

sector. All had many years experience as practice teachers. One no longer took students in her unit as she had moved into a senior management role, but she maintained an off-site practice teaching role. Another practice teacher was also involved in practice learning arrangement and in training practice teachers.

Three practice co-ordinators (PC), those who arrange, manage and support practice learning, were interviewed. Two were female and one male. Two worked for different universities offering social work programmes, and the third worked for a local authority. The tasks involved in the role included developing and supporting practice learning opportunities and creating new ones. One practice co-ordinator indicated that he was not really involved, seemingly suggesting that he viewed practice learning as what happens only when the student is directly involved.

Fourteen student social workers (SSW) undertaking practice learning were interviewed about their perceptions of proposed changes to practice learning. All were undertaking their practice learning in a university practice learning unit. Nine were master's degree students and five were taking an undergraduate degree. Eleven were female and three were male. There were no gender differences in findings, however.

Different stakeholders are likely to value some things over and above others using different criteria to judge achievement (Smith and Cantley, 1985). This is central to practice learning in social work where we know that some involved are likely to be heard more than others. The reasons for this need to be scrutinised and made transparent, and ways sought to assist others to contribute to understanding and evaluating practice learning. To begin this process, data was collected by semi-structured individual interviews (Arksey and Knight, 1999). The protocol considered potential benefits and limitations brought about by the national changes to the organisation of practice learning, thoughts concerning what makes practice learning an effective

experience, what barriers and possible solutions there are to creating an effective experience, and whether practice learning was thought to be important in social work education. Data was recorded and transcribed, and a thematic analysis was undertaken coding categories of data and creating links amongst and between the stakeholder groups to consider consistency and difference between individuals and groups (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006). Following this initial data collection and the development of practice learning opportunities built around this evidence, a midpoint focus group and plenary session were held with 16 undergraduate students, one of whom withdrew before completion, undertaking these new opportunities so that evidence could be checked and any necessary re-planning undertaken. Further discussions also took place with practice teachers and practice co-ordinators.

The study was limited given the small number of participants. However, the sample was not meant to be representative but purposive and to provide anticipatory perspectives on changes to practice learning. All those taking part were known to the interviewer. This may have engendered more positive statements about practice learning and anticipations about future changes, although the latter may have acted as a control allowing participants to reflect on existing practices and critique them in the light of proposed changes and developments. The research took place in one area which limited the findings. However, the study was designed to raise issues and report perceptions in a particular context of practice learning.

Findings

The themes discussed in the semi-structured interviews provide the framework for reporting the findings which begin with a consideration of changes, followed by an examination of perceptions of effectiveness in practice learning and possible barriers and solutions to achieving it.

Anticipated benefits and limitations brought about by changes to practice learning

Responses to the changes in practice learning can be grouped around three core themes: structural-relational, structural-pedagogic and structural-organisational (see figure one). The term 'structural' is used to indicate the organisational and imposed structures for practice learning (see Caspi and Reid, 2002). The term is not used to represent social structures and the wider context in which practice learning is situated.

The primary benefit associated with the changes was believed to be the increase in the length of time spent to be in practice learning during qualifying education. This was highlighted by all involved in the interviews. It was thought that the increase in time would allow practice teachers to build relationships with students, identify their needs, and prevent rushing with casework in a way that prevented learning taking place. The increase was also seen as providing opportunities to develop creative ways of practice teaching. This links to perceptions of effective practice learning experiences which were pedagogic and relational. The increase in time was also considered important in fitting in the assessment work and identifying and assisting weaker students in developing. For students, the increased length in time was perceived as allowing extra time to establish a rapport and on-going relationship with service users. PT1 and PC3 exemplify these themes well:

> We're attracting a wide range of people to social work, therefore need to spend time getting to know the needs of individuals. Having (*increased)* days means we don't have the feeling of having to rush through now and the case work doesn't override the practice learning. That will free us up to do more different things and use our time more creatively. Time to reflect on what the students are doing and why and what this means for social work. I think we should grasp those (opportunities), how can we use it differently in a controlled environment.

PC 3: The main benefit for the students' learning and for the agency to develop a practice curriculum, and for practice teachers as well, it gives a longer period to assess the student and also if the placement starts to go wrong there are more days to sort it out. Also, the number of observations have increased, more opportunities to assess.

It is interesting to note that practice teachers were currently thinking that there was not at present ample time to be as creative as they would like to be. This may reflect a projected 'halcyon era' concept, in which the anticipated changes rather than a past 'golden age' were seen uncritically as potentially positive, rather than a rigorously analysed and considered position. There are concerns with such a view if changes are not planned and potential problems are not acknowledged. However, the emphasis on a curriculum meeting student and pedagogical needs is central and, if developed appropriately, will offset some of these issues. The implication underlying these positive perceptions of prolonged practice was that learning in practice was important but this was accepted as a given rather than justified and explained.

One student recognised that the increased length in time spent in placement might create extra demands on the student and may require a more measured approach to the process to make it manageable. Another thought the time spent in practice may detract from college-based study and dilute learning.

Possible limitations were also identified at a structural-organisational level. The anticipated increase in days spent in practice learning was recognised as putting a strain on agencies taking students and potentially reducing practice opportunities, especially in popular field education areas where fewer students will be taken for longer periods, as stated in the following quotation:

PC 3: The down side is in the number of placements available now some agencies are saying we're taking a student for longer therefore can take less, it decreases the number of practice learning opportunities. You know popular agencies, you're going to get a lot of students wanting to go there and because they're taking students for a longer time and they can only take smaller numbers.

This cautious understanding was counterbalanced by one practice co-ordinator who identified a change in daily placement fees - a set fee paid to agencies taking students on practice learning experiences - as encouraging and possibly having a positive effect in opening up new practice learning experiences. This decrease has not been borne out in practice (CSCI 2005; Parker and Whitfield, 2006). However, it is interesting to note that the question of remuneration was not seen as potentially leading to agencies offering to take students for the income without an assessment of the suitability of the learning environment for the student. This may indicate the pressure to locate and secure practice learning experiences in a pragmatic rather than pedagogical and student-centred way.

Whilst a stipulation in the proposed changes requiring students to work with two different service user groups was considered by practice teachers and co-ordinators to be a potential problem for learners with rigid ideas of what they wanted to do once qualified in social work, it was generally viewed positively. This view derived from their experiences of students who were perceived as being increasingly specialised and focused although training remained generic. The students recognised, however, that working with service user groups that are not their preferred option might expand their horizons and can be a positive learning experience.

SSW 3: I didn't really want to work with children but now doing this, I'm learning a lot about how to interact with children or not as the case

may be and it's given me a slight confidence, It's not as scary, it's reduced my fear slightly of that particular client group.

The generic nature of social work education in the UK was not mentioned explicitly by any respondents but the recognition of benefits from working with varied service user groups suggested genericism carried benefits in the eyes of respondents. This suggested that social work is seen as a specific discipline and that focused work with particular groups is dependent on using transferable social work knowledge, skills and values in a specialised context. There is some degree of tension here with the views of practitioners who in some local authority teams are increasingly specialised and focused on policy developments at a national level (Parker and Whitfield, 2006).

Insert figure one

What makes an effective practice learning experience?
Respondents outlined two categories of an effective practice learning experience: those that were pedagogic and those aspects that were relational, whereas barriers to effective practice learning were organisational or agentic/individual. Findings mirrored existing research in confirming the importance of a planned and broad curriculum to meet needs (Bogo *et al.*, 2004; Caspi and Reid, 2002) and the centrality of relationships (Bogo *et al*. 2002; Parker, 2005).

Practice teachers identified the importance of providing a range of different opportunities which was something that was considered possible with the increase in time. Also emphasised as important was a broad curriculum that complemented the academic teaching and assisted students to make connections and use each other as a resource were emphasised as important. This may reflect some dissatisfaction with the system prior to the changes that practice teachers thought would be rectified, but also demonstrated the increased emphasis on the pedagogical role, which is reinforced in the new

award and emphasis on assessment function of practice teachers. Building on prior research, it shows a desire to integrate theory and practice to develop effective and satisfying experiences but a concern about ways in which this might be achieved.

> PT 1: Getting to know children and understand their world, that's easy to say but what do we mean by that and how do you do it? Sharing ideas about how to do it and sharing different tools on how to get children to talk. Getting students to share ideas, sharing good practice and information. We don't do enough of that because some of students have some creative idea and ways of working.

The practice co-ordinators identified the centrality of learning opportunities that challenge the student and the importance of regular supervision (PC 2 and 3). This led to a focus on university level support. Assessment was mentioned as important. PC 3 indicated that it was important to be continuous and thorough to be effective in practice learning. Learning experiences must meet the needs and requirements of students which involves the agency being aware of the requirements and being sensitive to the needs of students.

> PT 2: Opportunities to meet all the requirements is important. I think the agency themselves need to be clued up why the student is there what the student's role is going to be and I think the staff on the shop floor need to be friendly, welcoming, encouraging and a bit clued up.

It was also recognised that the practice agency and practice teacher can find alternative ways of meeting the requirements and, again, creativity is seen as key.

Students valued practice teachers when assisting the learning process by facilitating completion of the practice logs which relate practice to theory and to learning and challenging:

> SSW 2: I think definitely the practice teachers (*that make practice learning effective*)... they push you to think.

Relational aspects such as being available for students at times other than formal supervision were also considered to be crucial as PT 1 stated:

> Students are quite raw and some may be struggling maybe, it's being available that's crucial, not just for supervision but having an open door policy.

Availability is important in dealing with the affective responses of students to their learning:

> PT 3: One of the current students shared with us in the team meeting that one man she was working with had died and hadn't been expected to die and she shared the impact that had had on her which was very good.

Forming constructive relationships was also perceived as important for clients suggesting that a positive teacher/student relationship was instrumental in learning safe practice. This was not amplified, although open dialogue between students and supervisors was recognised as important. This dialogue included involvement in planning and identifying learning needs and the practice teacher:

> being confident to be challenged, questioned... not be(ing) afraid to say I don't know the answer but let's find out together it might be. It then comes back to openness (PC 1)

The practice co-ordinator went on to identify the two-way process of giving feedback and being able to deliver constructive feedback.

Students also identified having someone around as important:

> it's having the support there and knowing the support's there. If your practice teacher's not there there's always someone around (SSW 1)

Supervision was appreciated as a dialogic process and group supervision was mentioned as useful (SSW 3). Students stated that if the practice teacher was not approachable and available that this would cause barriers to effective practice learning.

One student said she benefited from being placed with peers, which was felt to assist the learning process, as well as preventing isolation, echoing Griffiths' (2003) suggestion that peer support in learning assists in cognitive and affective ways:

> SSW 3: Having access to practice teachers *(is central to an effective practice learning experience)*, definitely, and also being with peers. I understand that some people, students have had problems in going to agencies by themselves so I think being with some peers is beneficial because you're learning together.

Barriers and solutions to effective practice learning
Barriers to effective experiences included operational pressures for practitioners suggesting a hierarchy that privileged practice above future workforce development, student motivational and perceptive issues and structural problems. Practice teachers recognised the huge barriers that can arise because of pressures of daily work and because the responsibilities of supervising, teaching and assessing a student in practice are not recognised

and that preparation and planning for taking a student did not always happen in agencies. The practice co-ordinators also identified the pressures of work which may involve diminishing the relevance of learning and creating a potential barrier to developing effective practice learning.

It was suggested that students may have rigid and inflexible ideas or be inadequately prepared or even fail to prepare for supervision. They may not complete agreed tasks between sessions and it is important for regular contact to take place to overcome these potential problems. But the overall view was positive if co-ordination, planning, support and funding is adequate:

> PT 3: we're fortunate in this area because we're getting more joined up between the agencies and the practice learning consortium and I think if we don't get the extended funding for that, we must keep the impetus for that for how it's planned. The thing is we need a central point, that's something to support systems for the whole process, a central point that the agencies go to, we go to the practice teachers go to and the students go to. The big thing is always going to be money, is it sufficient – the good will is there, but I'm always concerned if it doesn't get the funding that it needs...

Finance, whilst a benefit to agencies providing practice learning opportunities, was seen as a potential barrier by students as the extended time in practice carried an additional burden of not being able to work which, for some students, especially those postgraduate students who do not have access to student loans was considered particularly difficult:

> SSW 1: the financial aspect at the moment, a big thing amongst the students not to have any support financially. At the moment there are some students here who don't have the money to pay bus fares at the moment so that's bad. There are students here finding it really difficult

now - they're having to worry about financial matters when they should be applying themselves to the practice.

Solutions were seen in the increased attention and status accorded to practice learning at all levels – professional body, governmental, and in creating initiatives such as Learning Resource Networks and providing increased financial support.

Is practice learning important?

> PC 1: Just a bit! Because it makes the whole of the training come alive. Students say that over and over again. They start with trepidation and leave with a feeling of fulfilment

All respondents believed practice learning to be crucial to social work education. One practice teacher explained that social work was not simply an academic programme of study but was also a practice and vocational course during which students can begin to link theory and practice and suggested that the increased length of time may assist this process:

> PT 2: The placement is where you learn to do all of this... (extending it) may be better in relating theory to practice which normally happens about week six, maybe it will happen then or later. Because it is a practical job you've got to learn how to do it.

Students echoed the views that practice learning was crucial in integrating the practical skills and theoretical base for social work. This was articulately put by one student who likened social work education to the driving test:

> SSW 2: I couldn't imagine being at university for three years and manage to get my qualification to be thrown out into my first office, I think it would be very difficult. Maybe taking the theory test of the driving and not

having any practical driving experience and going on the motorway... I think it's absolutely vital I couldn't imagine not having it.

The findings were important in developing the extended programme and practice curriculum at the University in which the study took place. It was, therefore, important to revisit some of the questions, findings about benefits and limitations, and resulting practice when students took up these placements in a midpoint focus group and final plenary session. An important finding at the midpoint indicated that the extended time was creating additional and sustained demands on students. There was a need to ensure that the time was used for deep learning rather than attempting to sustain the intense experience of shorter opportunities. This indicates that the increase in practice learning days is important. The concern expressed about reduced opportunities has not been borne out as seen by Practice Learning Taskforce figures (2005) and enhanced placement payments have allowed the development of a range of practice learning opportunities (Parker, Hillison and Wilson, 2004; Parker, Golightley, Blackburn and Washer, 2004).

Discussion

The findings confirm much of the research undertaken in respect of the importance of support, supervision, group learning, integrating theory in practice for effective practice learning (Bogo *et al.*, 2002, Regehr, 2002). The extended time demanded by the new qualification in England, whilst creating demands on placement provider agencies and practice teachers, is seen as a positive move in developing creative and innovative learning experiences and enhancing the quality for students and, ultimately, service users (Parker and Whitfield, 2006). It was interesting to note that the different groups tended to agree as did male and female students and those on both levels of study, perhaps suggesting that the impact I had as interviewer was not important in influencing the responses. To be successful, educators must use the extended time in a developmental and creative way. This includes implications for the training of those involved in practice learning concerning adult learning,

innovative learning and its evaluation and the construction of dialogic processes that support student learning within and between organisations. Although the focus group data indicated that where extended practice learning opportunities were used the time should be clearly planned and structured to promote deep learning and not simply a more intense experience.

Finance was highlighted as an issue which will need continued attention if social work education is to continue to attract and retain high calibre students. Whilst the changes mean that practice learning providers are paid for their efforts and this may expand the numbers of practice learning opportunities available, attention must be paid to maintaining standards and offering appropriate support to new agencies and inexperienced practice teachers. Students are increasingly stretched financially. They are paid a bursary but cannot supplement their income during practice learning time. It will be important that the higher education sector highlights this to the funding bodies responsible and links student finance to the debate concerning workforce development (Topss England, 2003; Parker and Whitfield, 2006). Without attention to finance and bursary issues, it is likely that the composition of the workforce will change over time having implications for the sector. If mature students with responsibilities are precluded from study social work agencies must consider how to deal with a younger qualified workforce, or workforce planning initiatives must develop along the lines of work-based routes, secondments and traineeships (Parker and Whitfield, 2006). A further issue relates to top-up fees for higher education in England which may deter potential candidates from programmes and lead to further workforce problems. The disparity with other public services and helping professions, such as nursing or teaching, may take prospective candidates.

Extended practice learning time will increase the potential to develop practice curricula designed to meet the standards and requirements and to provide support and assistance to students who are struggling. This will have to be

well planned and continuously reviewed. It is possible, with continued development of the practice teacher role, that continuous and rigorous assessment of learning is enhanced by the increased duration of practice learning and that students are enabled to integrate theoretical models and practice more fully. However, time must not necessarily be viewed uncritically as positive. It is how extended time is used for that will be important. This creates demands on social work educators within higher education and social work agencies that will need to be supported by continued education, debate and supervisory support. In turn, this raises a resource question and, given the changes in funding for practice learning that constrains the way universities use funding for practice learning and curtails the amount of funding given to universities, consideration of how this will be supported needs to take place. A continued emphasis on practice learning will be fundamental and it will be important to foster relations with Skills for Care, who are responsible for developing Learning Resource Networks across the nine English region.

Practice teachers and provider agencies are central to the development of effective experiences. The availability and support of qualified practitioners, over and above formal supervision, is recognised as essential to learning. Whilst this may be conceptualised as a type of apprenticeship model, respondents seemed to indicate that a dialogic process and articulated model was preferred. It seems that many practice teachers and assessors have undertaken training as a means of improving career opportunities (Lindsay and Tompsett, 1998; Parker and Whitfield, 2006). Agencies will need to consider how they can support and retain people to assess practice learning opportunities. Certainly local authorities are assessed and audited on their involvement in practice learning and education and this is a clear driver for further work (CSCI, 2005). Continued professional development requirements for registration may provide a means for training new assessors but a clear steer is required if this important role is to be enhanced and retention achieved.

The implications of these changes impacted on the curriculum for social work education, demanding a constructive dialogue between the academy and the field in which the focus was learning for practice rather than privileging either academic learning or practice to the exclusion of the other. This creates challenges for social work education, but offers potential benefits for the education of students, the development of discrete social work research areas and, ultimately, enhanced experiences for people receiving social work services. When changes are planned and introduced it is important to ensure that all stakeholders are consulted, that views are taken into account and that revisions are made on the basis of subsequent evaluations. The dynamism of change and perceptions are important in developing future services and education that is responsive and not built on a single set of perceptions that may be misguided or partial but on multiple perspectives that are continually refined.

References

Arksey, H. and Knight, P. (1999) *Interviewing for Social Scientists*, London, Sage.

Bogo, M., Regehr, C., Hughes, J., Power, R. and Globerman, J. (2002) 'Evaluating a measure of student field performance in direct service: testing reliability and validity of explicit criteria.' *Journal of Social Work Education.* vol. 38, no. 3, pp. 385-401.

Carpenter, J. (2005) *Evaluating Outcomes in Social Work Education,* London, Social Care Institute for Excellence/Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education.

Caspi, J. and Reid, W. (2002) *Educational Supervision in Social Work*. New York, Columbia University Press.

Cropper, A. (2000) 'Mentoring as an inclusive device for the excluded: black students' experience of a mentoring scheme.' *Social Work Education*. vol. 19, no. 6, pp. 597-607.

CSCI (2005) *Social Services Performance Assessment Framework Indicators*, Commission for Social Care Inspection, www.csci.org.uk/council_perfromance/paf/paf-2004_2005_full.pdf

Department of Health (1998) *Modernising Social Services: Promoting independence, improving protection, raising standards.* Cm 4169 London, The Stationery Office.

Department of Health (2002) *Requirements for Social Work Training*. London, Department of Health.

Doel, M. (2005) *New Approaches to Practice Learning*. Capturing the Learning series: Skills for Care.

Doel, M., Deacon, L. and Sawdon, C. (2004) *An Audit of Practice Learning in the Social Work Degree*, www.practicelearning.org.uk

Doel, M. and Shardlow, S. (2005) *Modern Social Work Practice: Teaching and learning in practice settings*. Aldershot, Arena.

Fortune, A., McCarthy, M. and Abramson, J. (2001) 'Student learning processes in field education: Relationship pf learning activities to quality of field instruction, satisfaction, and performance among MSW students.' *Journal of Social Work Education,* vol. 37, no. 1, pp. 111-124.

Griffiths, S. (2003) 'Teaching and learning in small groups', in *A Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: Enhancing academic practice*. 2nd edition, eds H. Fry, S. Ketteridge and S. Marshall, London, Kogan Paul.

GSCC (2002a) *Accreditation of Universities to Grant Degrees in Social Work* London, General Social Care Council.

GSCC (2002b) *Codes of Practice for Employees and Employers*. London, General Social Care Council.

GSCC (2005) *Post-Qualifying Framework for Social Work Education and Training.* London, General Social Care Council.

Hesse-Biber, S.N. and Leavy, P. (2006) *The Practice of Qualitative Research*, London, Sage.

Kearney, P. (2003) *A Framework for Supporting and Assessing Practice Learning*. SCIE Position Paper no. 2. London, SCIE.

Knight, C. (2001) 'The process of field instruction: BSW and MSW students' views of effective field supervision', *Journal of Social Work Education*, vol. 37, no. 3, pp. 357-79.

Maidment, J. (2000) 'Methods used to teach social work students in the field: a research report from New Zealand', *Social Work Education*. vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 145-54.

Maidment, J. (2003) 'Problems experienced by students on field placement: using research findings to inform curriculum design and content', *Australian Social Work,* vol. 56, no. 1, pp. 50-60.

Manthorpe, J. and Stanley, N. (1999) 'Dilemmas in professional education: responding effectively to students with mental health problems', *Journal of Interprofessional Care.* vol. 13, no. 4, pp. 355-365.

Marsh, P. and Triseliotis, J. (1996) *Social Workers and Probation Officers: Their training and first year in work,* Aldershot, Avebury.

Parker, J. (2004) *Effective Practice Learning in Social Work*, Exeter, Learning Matters.

Parker, J. (2005) Developing perceptions of competence during practice learning *British Journal of Social Work,* Advanced Access Publication, 17 Oct 2005 http://bjsw.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/reprint/bch347?ijkey=j0v3DZdwH3NvcHZ&keytype=ref

Parker, J., Golightley, M., Blackburn, M. and Washer, E. (2004) *Identifying Voluntary and Independent Sector Practice Learning Opportunities in the East Riding of Yorkshire*, University of Hull.

Parker, J., Hillison, K. and Wilson, L. (2003) 'SWiSP: The Social Workers in Schools Project', *Practice,* vol. 15, no. 3, pp. 69-87

Parker, J. and Whitfield, J. (2006) *Linking Practice Learning and the Recruitment and Retention of Staff*, unpublished research report, University of Hull.

PLTF (2005) *Annual Report 2004-05, second annual report,* Leeds, Practice Learning Taskforce, Department of Health, Skills for Care.

QAA (2000) *Subject Benchmark Statements: Social policy and administration and social work*, Gloucester, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

Rai, G.S. (2004) 'International fieldwork experience: a survey of US schools', *International Social Work*, vol. 47, no. 2, pp. 213-226.

Regehr, C., Regehr, G., Leeson, J. and Fusco, L. (2002) 'Setting priorities for learning in the field practicum: A comparative study of students and field instructors.' *Journal of Social Work Education*, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 55-65.

Sapey, B., Turner, R. and Orton, S. (2004) *Access to Practice: Overcoming the barriers to practice learning for disabled social work students*. Southampton: SWAP.

Shardlow, S. and Doel, M. (2006) *Practice Learning and Teaching*. 2nd edition, Basingstoke, Palgrave.

Silverman, D. (2005) *Doing Qualitative Research*, 2nd edition, London, Sage.

Singh, G. (2006) *Developing and Supporting Black and Minority Ethnic Practice Teachers and Assessors*. Leeds, Skills for Care.

Smith, G. and Cantley, C. (1985) *Assessing Health Care*. Buckingham, Open University Press.

Topss (2002) *National Occupational Standards for Social Workers in England*, London, Topss.

Topss England/ Taskforce (2004) *The Future of the Practice Learning Taskforce*. Consultation Paper, Leeds, Topss England.

Valentine, D. (2004) 'Field Education: Exploring the future, expanding the vision.' *Journal of Social Work Education*, vol. 40, no. 1, pp. 3-11.

Wray, J., Fell, B., Stanley, N., Manthorpe, J. and Coyne, E. (2005) *The PEdDS Project: Disabled social work students and placements*. Hull: HEFCE/University of Hull.