Evaluating the impact of post-qualifying social work education

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ABSTRACT (175 words)

Post-qualifying awards in social work are well established within the continuing professional development agenda for qualified social workers in the UK. The evaluation of education and training should be an integral part of this agenda because it is important to ensure that programmes continue to meet standards of delivery, are successful in meeting their aims and objectives and are making an impact on practice. However, there is a limited amount of published work on the evaluation of post-qualifying social work education, with studies often focusing on programme delivery rather than on their impact on practice.

This paper explores evaluative work within the current post-qualifying social work framework and discusses the results of an evaluation of the Vulnerable Adults and Community Care Practice programme, a specialist post-qualifying social work education programme run by a UK university, as an example of an evaluation of the impact on practice. The results indicate positive evidence of impact on practice and demonstrate examples of how the programme has had a direct effect on individuals, teams, organisations and on people who use services.

Keywords: Post-Qualifying Social Work; Evaluation; Impact

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INTRODUCTION

Post-qualifying awards in social work are a well established part of the continuing professional development agenda for qualified social workers in the UK (Brown et al. 2006). The completion of a post-qualifying social work (PQSW) programme is considered to be evidence of *continued and enhanced* competence to practice. Employers, such as local government councils with social services responsibilities, are encouraged to ensure their staff, including increasing numbers of internationally trained social workers from e.g. South Africa, Australia and the United States working in the UK (GSCC 2006), undertake such programmes in order to improve the service they offer, and to demonstrate that they are competent to practice social work in complex situations. This also supports recommendations from the UK's recent Options for Excellence Review to improve the quality of social work practice and to define the role of social workers, including training and skill requirements (DH 2006).

In turn, universities providing PQSW programmes need to be able to demonstrate that any learning makes a difference to a social worker's professional development and impacts on day to day practice and service delivery. Yet this type of evaluation is rarely undertaken. This paper details an attempt to evaluate the impact on social work practice of one of Bournemouth University's (South Coast of England, UK) specialist PQSW programmes, Vulnerable Adults and Community Care Practice.

POST-QUALIFYING AWARDS IN SOCIAL WORK

In 1997, the requirements for post-qualifying education in England were revised with the PQSW award containing two parts – Part 1 and Part 2. To pass Part 1,

candidates need to demonstrate that they have improved and extended their levels of competence gained at the point of qualification.

Part 2 recognises the competence of social workers who are involved in more complex casework and who have gone on to contribute to the development of others, for example students, colleagues, volunteers and foster carers. Part 2 is also organised into specialist areas of practice, with programmes that recognise the specific skills and knowledge required for differing social work roles e.g. vulnerable adults, children and people with mental health issues. In 2004, the General Social Care Council undertook a further review of post-qualifying education and training and published a revised framework to come into effect from September 2007 (GSCC 2004). All learning completed under the current framework will be fully recognised and transferable under the new arrangements.

That the framework for post-qualifying education is constantly being reviewed and revised indicates the level of importance placed on continuing professional development for social workers and the need to ensure that post-qualifying education continues to deliver the level and competencies required for social workers of the future.

PQSW EVALUATION

The evaluation of education and training should be an integral part of its continued development and improvement. It is important to ensure that programmes continue to meet standards of delivery, are successful in meeting their aims and objectives and are making an impact on practice. However, there is limited published work on the evaluation of PQSW education and training.

In recent years, a number of reviews have illustrated this lack of evaluative research. Mitchell (2001) found little evidence of the evaluation of post-qualifying education. In 2005, Carpenter undertook a review of evaluation within social work education and again found limited evidence of research evaluating the impact of post-qualifying education and training (Carpenter 2005). Of 60 papers identified in a knowledge review of assessment training in social work (Crisp et al. 2003), only 11 reported any information about their impact (Carpenter 2005). The most recent publication, looking at the impact of education and training in childcare and protection work, lends further weight to support the general lack of evaluative research in PQSW education (Ogilvie-Whyte 2006). Providing such evidence of impact is essential if education is to be evaluated effectively. Resources and money are potentially wasted if programmes do not have the desired impact on practice (Skinner and Whyte 2004).

One of the most widely used frameworks for evaluation has been developed by Kirkpatrick (1983) and covers four possible levels for evaluation (see Box 1). Brown (2003) has adapted this model to make it more explicit and relevant for social work education and training. It includes the effect of training on the candidates' team and organisation (see Box 2). Further adaptations of the Kirkpatrick model continue. Recent examples include interprofessional education (Barr et al. 2000), taking into account the impact of training on users and carers (Barr et al. 2000), and post-qualifying education in mental health (Bailey et al. 2003).

To show evidence of in-depth impact on practice, education and training must be evaluated beyond the first reactionary level (Box 1). Methods employed to evaluate education and training are continually under review. Carpenter believes that poor quality research designs are a major problem in establishing a solid evidence base for social work education and training (Carpenter 2005). Where studies are carried out, they commonly focus on the format and delivery elements of programmes or the

'reaction' levels (Bailey 2002). In general, evaluations rely on post-education and post-training questionnaires that provide basic information about delivery rather than any evidence of impact at any of the higher levels. There are, however, a small number of studies showing impact at higher levels, including a small qualitative study by Mitchell (2001) who interviewed key stakeholders and candidates who had undertaken a PQSW programme in the UK. She was able to provide evidence of impact on individual practice and on the organisation as a whole.

There is also a particular paucity of evidence with regard to impact on service users and carers (Ogilvie-Whyte 2006). In their evaluation of a Birmingham University Inter-professional Training Programme in Community Health (1998-2002) Carpenter et al (2003) assessed outcomes for service users using a wide range of standard outcome measurements. However, social workers have questioned whether these traditional quantitative methods are able to engage effectively with complexity, individuality and meaning (Felton 2005).

Continuing professional development also needs to be supported by a workplace learning environment (Cooper & Rixon 2001). They argue that cultural and attitudinal changes need to be encouraged and underpinned with concrete support, such as study facilities, access to research, and administrative support. Postle et al (2002) highlight some of the contradictions and tensions that occur between employer and individual professional development, and suggest that teaching and assessment strategies, involving synergy, partnerships and innovation need to be developed.

INSERT BOX 1

INSERT BOX 2

Within this context, therefore, the overarching aim of this study was to evaluate the impact of Bournemouth University's Vulnerable Adults and Community Care PQSW programme on practice, and more specifically to look for evidence of impact at Levels 3, 4 and 5 (Box 2). There is debate in the literature (for example, see Carpenter 2005) over the most effective ways of assessing educational impact of social work programmes. Whilst not subscribing to this often polarised debate between quantitative and qualitative research methods, we choose to take a more realistic approach to this impact evaluation (Pawson & Tilley 1997) – one that is more concerned with the linkage between research processes and how each particular method answers specific research questions (Creswell & Plano Clark 2007). To this end, we chose a predominantly qualitative approach to this evaluation, because of: the limited research in this area at Levels 3, 4 and 5 (Box 2) and the complexity of both programme and work environment. A predominantly qualitative approach therefore offered the opportunity to listen to the views of candidates and managers with *their* context, explore their meaning and gain insight into any working examples given. This in-depth exploration would not have been possible using methods aiming for statistical significance.

The programme is one of only a handful of programmes in the UK with a focus on vulnerable adults. It is offered at an academic level equivalent to an undergraduate's final year, i.e. honours degree level (Level H) and forms a graduate diploma for those candidates with degrees. Completion of the programme can also enable candidates who already have a diploma in social work to extend this to an honours degree alongside the PQSW professional qualification. This PQSW programme is a taught academic programme comprising five units:

- Part 1 – consolidation of competence;
- The organisation and delivery of care;

- Assessment in community care;

- Working with vulnerable adults;

- Enabling others portfolio.

In addition, students are required to have at least one direct observation and three third party testimonies of their practice to demonstrate they have met the competencies of this PQSW qualification.

METHOD

The evaluation included five cohorts of candidates (together with their managers) who had completed the PQSW Vulnerable Adults and Community Care Practice programme through Bournemouth University. This involved three regions in the UK (Hereford & Worcester (West Midlands), Wessex (South West) and Derbyshire (East Midlands)) and courses that were completed from 2003 to 2005. The study was conducted between November 2004 and May 2006.

Ethical approval was sought from the Directors of Social Services in each region prior to commencing the research. Each Director was sent a letter and information sheet outlining the project aims and question areas. Once ethical approval was granted, the selected candidates and managers were sent an information sheet outlining the purpose of the evaluation and a list of the questions to be discussed. Candidates and managers were requested to sign a consent form once they agreed to participate. Each interview lasted for between 20 and 40 minutes and was audio-tape recorded with permission. The candidate interviews were conducted via telephone and the manager interviews conducted either face-to-face or by telephone.

The evaluation was divided into three main stages as detailed below.

Stage 1: Review of past evaluation forms and interviews
This stage was the building block for the main evaluation and helped to focus Stages 2 and 3. It is described briefly here to provide the context for these subsequent stages.

The programme evaluation forms (tick box questionnaires) were analysed and reviewed for each module and were available from 37 (out of a possible total of 48)

candidates across all cohorts. Candidates indicate a high level of satisfaction with the programme in terms of the content and mix of theory and practice. The open and participatory learning style was particularly valued by the candidates.

Six telephone interviews had been completed with past candidates in November 2004 by a member of the Bournemouth University research team (SK). For this current evaluation, these interviews were briefly transcribed and reviewed, with the key themes extracted. No personal data was provided with the interview tapes to ensure anonymity for the candidates.

Stage 2: Telephone interviews with candidates

Here, we aimed for a minimum sample of 10 candidates, for two reasons: first, a sample of 1 in 5 was considered sufficient to give a snapshot of the programme's impact; and second this figure matched allocated resources for the evaluation. Using the programme student lists, a sample of 16/48 candidates was selected for semi-structured telephone interview. Care was taken to ensure that the sample included a representative mix of ages, gender and local government council. Six candidates declined to participate, therefore, 10 candidates were interviewed during Stage 2. These interviews focused on the programme's impact on practice.

Stage 3: Manager interviews

On completion of the candidate interviews, each candidate was asked to provide the name of their line manager or another appropriate person who had been aware of and/or supported them during the programme. In total, eight managers were interviewed.

The question schedule for managers was revised, based on the initial results from the Stage 2 candidate interviews. Completing the Stage 2 candidate interviews

before the Stage 3 manager interviews enabled the researcher to use some of the candidate data to probe and 'check out' some of the candidate claims with the managers, thereby strengthening and clarifying the evidence provided.

Data from all interviews were semi-transcribed and detailed notes produced. Each set of notes was reviewed and the content analysed with key themes extracted (Ritchie & Spencer 1994). When devising the key themes, the interview questions were used as a basis for organising the data, with topic headings covering impact at individual, team, organisation and people who use services level.

This evaluation was undertaken by an independent researcher who was not previously connected with the PQSW programme nor Bournemouth University. No names or identifiable data are used within this paper and no personal data has been shared with Bournemouth University to ensure anonymity for those who participated. Any text presented in italics refers to verbatim quotations, some of which have been tidied to improve readability without losing meaning.

RESULTS

As the focus of this study was to evaluate the impact of Bournemouth University's Vulnerable Adults and Community Care PQSW programme on practice, and more specifically to look for evidence of impact at Levels 3, 4 and 5 (Box 2), this section is divided into 4 areas of impact:

Personal impact

Team impact

Organisational impact

The perspective of people who use services

Factors that may have affected the impact of the programme are also considered.

Personal impact

There was a clear impact on the candidates' confidence and practice, in three main areas:

- *Policy and legislation issues;*

- *Reassessment of role and responsibilities;*

- *Reflective practice.*

Policy and legislation

The programme provided candidates with an opportunity to gain a better understanding of government legislation in social care. This sub-section reports on the candidates' interpretation of this aim. This part of the programme had direct benefits on practice by providing a clearer understanding of statutory roles and duty of care. One candidate gave an example of how this had impacted on a particular case involving an abuse situation in a neighbouring local government council. Due to this candidate's knowledge of the responsibilities of host local government councils, he felt that he was able to prevent an instance of bad practice occurring.

Other examples included increased confidence to become more involved with developmental issues by joining a working group:

> *I've tended to shy away from anything that is not part of my casework, but I have taken on membership of two groups and some developmental work…a lot of it is that my knowledge of policy that we work within. My wider knowledge is so much more since doing the programme. I feel much more confident in taking on that sort of role, than I did.* (Stage 2 candidate interview)

The managers supported comments made by candidates and believed positive impacts had been made at a team level as one person enabled a whole team to become more up-to-date and aware of any such policy or legislative issues. One manager felt it encouraged the team to move forward in their practice and think about general issues rather than just focusing on the more immediate concerns of their work:

> *Something that is lacking in a lot of our staff is that they are focused upon the immediate decisions and don't really have a bigger picture view.* (Stage 3 manager interview)

Reassessment of role and responsibilities

The programme also encouraged candidates to take a fresh look at their role, which helped many to gain a better appreciation of the work they do. Candidates talked about feeling re-energised and having a renewed interest in their work:

> *The programme made you think more outside the box again. When you've been doing something for a long time you do it routinely and don't think about it.* (Stage 2 candidate interview)

One manager recognised the importance of having a better understanding of the whole picture in order to gain more rewards from the work. This supports the views of candidates who felt they had achieved a greater understanding of their own role:

> *The secondary effect is quite important. There is always a danger that people get bureaucratic in their approach, they don't understand the point and you get formulaic responses. The programme had made the job more enjoyable*

> *for others, more able to think about real issues as opposed to fitting things*
>
> *into little slots, it's more rewarding.* (Stage 3 manager interview)

Reflective practice

The whole process of reflecting on practice in protected time appeared to be a key element in the learning gained from the programme and was recognised by both candidates and managers:

> *When working every day and working flat out, you get on a rollercoaster…no*
>
> *time to stop. The programme makes you stop and reflect on this, think about*
>
> *what you are doing.* (Stage 1 candidate interview)

The value of reflective practice was supported by the managers, one of whom felt that the style of the programme had jolted some older candidates 'out of their torpor'! It was also seen to encourage a more analytical way of thinking, which is beneficial to practice:

> *It's beneficial to those who have done it – and does give them a higher*
>
> *degree of intelligent thinking…more analytical, taking what they are learning*
>
> *into practice and applying it more intelligently…because of the reflection and*
>
> *learning, you think about how you apply it in the workplace, there is a level of*
>
> *maturity.* (Stage 3 manager interview)

Having the opportunity to discuss practice with other social workers was also seen to be invaluable, illustrating the benefit of shared debate. A number of those interviewed stated that they hoped to continue some sort of discussion forum within their own organisations to ensure the continuity and support that this type of discussion promoted.

From the managers' perspective, this interaction with other professionals was seen to lead to a broader view of work and encourage the development of new ideas:

> *The interaction with other professionals has broadened her knowledge and attitude maybe; it's helped her to see what's going on as you can get isolated.* (Stage 3 manager interview)

Team impact

The candidates felt that their increased knowledge enabled them to update their colleagues and add a fresh dimension to team discussions:

> *If you are coming in with new information and they* [other team members] *haven't got time, it's very good to be able to leave information for them and guidance and things. That has gelled the team a little bit and promoted the programme as well.* (Stage 2 candidate interview)

From the managers' perspective, this helped to improve the skill base of teams:

> *I feel as more people are being trained, people have a better understanding of what needs to be done. It's building up the skill base of the team.* (Stage 3 manager interview)

Where candidates were involved in practice teaching or mentoring of students, it was felt that the programme had given them more confidence and insight to provide better and more focused support. One candidate felt that, since he had completed the programme, he was now providing a much more effective placement for students than he had done in the past. Another candidate felt that the programme had

provided the impetus for her team to push forward on a new project, which was proving to be very successful.

In other cases, those who had attended the programme acted as ambassadors to others who were thinking of attending. One candidate had begun to build a resource library within the workplace to provide support for other team members undertaking the programme. This was supported by one of the managers who found that, as a result of one of his team undertaking the VACCP, two others were now doing it.

> *It's very encouraging to continue with professional development, as a consequence of* [X] *doing this, two other members of staff are now doing it; it acts as a snowball, which is very useful.* (Stage 3 manager interview)

Some managers, however, highlighted difficulties with staff being away from work to attend study days. This often created a higher workload for other team members and stretched resources.

Organisational impact

The impact on the organisation was harder to define. A couple of managers, however, were able to give real examples of organisational impact. One felt that their organisation was now flagging up more people who were vulnerable due to the insight and knowledge that the candidates now brought to the organisation. This enabled their organisation to do more work with families about what is, and what is not, appropriate behaviour. It was felt that this was a direct result of a team member attending the programme:

> *We are flagging up more people who are vulnerable and where we may need to intervene. Before we didn't know, we didn't have that insight and*

> *information. Now we are clearer about the numbers of people who may be*
>
> *vulnerable.* (Stage 3 manager interview)

Another manager described how one candidate had presented an aspect of his training to his team members on anti-discriminatory behaviour. This was so well received that other departments had asked for the presentation to be repeated for them. This illustrates a further organisational impact, with the knowledge base being broadened across the organisation.

People who use services

While some candidates found it difficult to give direct examples of the impact on people who use services, through discussion of this issue it was clear that some key links could be made. One candidate found that research disseminated as part of the programme had enabled her to identify a potential 'at risk' client group. As a result, she had been involved in developing a new care pathway for this group, which is currently undergoing ethical review.

A couple of candidates felt that the programme had given them a better understanding of assessment procedures and therefore a greater awareness of the perspective of people who use services. This included a better understanding of why some questions need to be asked and how the assessment procedure could be more finely tuned. One candidate felt that as a result of the programme and in situations where he believed clients no longer needed support, he did not ask unnecessary questions – to illustrate:

> *The impact is on my general awareness when I'm interviewing. I know exactly*
>
> *why I'm asking questions. It's probably helped me hone my work in finer*

> *detail, not beating around the bush so much and just getting on with it.* (Stage
> 2 candidate interview)

The benefits to people who use services of a better trained and more knowledgeable
workforce was illustrated by one of the managers who felt that better trained staff
would naturally improve this service:

> *Just because I've got the manager title doesn't mean I know best what to do;
> what makes the vulnerable adults course successful is when you have a
> group of people who are confident, motivated and have got ideas about what
> to do, then one of you will come up with a solution in how to deal with
> something. To me that's the impact, and that's got to be better for the service
> user.* (Stage 3 manager interview)

Issues affecting the impact of the programme

The Stage 2 and 3 interviews revealed that some of the line managers had a lack of
understanding about the PQSW programme and what it entailed. The perceived lack
of information also impacted on some managers' ability to support students as well
as they would have liked. If managers were given more information about the
programme content and intended outcomes, this may have helped them provide
better support to the candidates. Although organisations appear to have a clear
understanding of the programme via their staff development units, these units had
not been able to fully inform the organisation about the nature of the programme, a
potentially important learning point.

This lack of understanding about the programme was also recognised and discussed
by some of the managers, who acknowledged that their support was limited due to

their lack of knowledge about the aims and objectives of the programme. This meant that they felt unable to discuss the programme as fully as they might have done during supervision. It also meant that they were not always able to ensure that the candidates were given the caseloads or work most suitable for their programme requirements:

> *If I was sure about what* [X] *was doing we could have shared that with the whole team. As it was, we didn't follow through, but kept it within supervision sessions between ourselves. If I'm clear about what people are doing, then we can share with the whole team.* (Stage 3 manager interview)

Bournemouth University programmes now have a line managers' handbook in order to explain the course objectives and to help engage the manager in a candidate's learning.

DISCUSSION

This evaluation aimed to enable a better understanding of how training and education may be of value to practice and whether it is possible to provide evidence of the impact of education and training on the individual's practice, team and organisation, and people who use services. Using Brown's model (2003) (Box 2) this meant evaluating at Levels 3, 4 and 5.

The results indicate that this has been achieved for the Vulnerable Adults and Community Care Practice PQSW programme, with clear examples of the programme impacting directly on individuals, teams, organisations and people who use services in a positive way. The focus of the evaluation was on the impact that the programme had on all levels. The clearest evidence of impact was at the personal level for the

candidates. Many were able to provide real examples where their increased knowledge and understanding led to a change in practice. This included becoming more involved in developmental issues, preventing bad practice and improving supervision. Being updated on policy issues provided a valuable basis for candidates to move practice forward and improve their understanding of their roles and responsibilities within the broader national framework.

By using a qualitative approach candidates were able to explore and explain areas of practice that they felt had been influenced by their education and training. By 'checking out' candidate claims during Stage 3 interviews, managers provided valuable support for them and could arguably be seen to enhance the validity of these particular results. The manager interviews also provided evidence of the broader impact on the team and organisation. It was clear that there were benefits to the team, with candidates bringing new perspectives on issues and enabling the team to be refreshed and updated. These findings were consistent across five cohorts in three different regions and support those identified by Mitchell (2001) in her qualitative study with candidates and managers to ascertain the impact of PQSW training on practice. However, in common with Mitchell, this is a small-scale study. The extent to which findings may be generalised or transferred to other programmes rests upon careful academic application and the provision of a clear account of the specifics of the programme and its follow up (Hammersley 1992; Schofield 1993).

The majority of current studies are only able to provide evidence of impact at the reaction level (Bailey 2002) of Kirkpatrick's model (Box 1) and are focused on testing processes and knowledge rather than on how that training is put into practice. That is not to say that the more practical or process orientated elements of education and training are not important issues for review or evaluation – indeed, the organisation of a programme can affect its outcomes and it is important to ensure that the basic

format and delivery of programmes are suitable for candidates. However, this level of evaluation should be seen more as a stepping-stone to move on and evaluate at a higher level rather than as an end in itself. We need to ensure that the learning is, and can be, applied directly to practice.

That said, the delivery and organisation of the programme under consideration in this paper appear to be working well. The content and mix of theory and practice are good and are complemented by the open and participatory style of teaching. This participatory learning style was particularly valued by the candidates and provided a strong basis for open discussion and reflection, enabling candidates to learn from their own and others' experiences. The results of this evaluation provide clear evidence that this PQSW programme in Vulnerable Adults and Community Care Practice has been successfully delivered. At the reaction level, the Stage 1 evaluation forms illustrate a high level of satisfaction. This is supported by both Stage 1 and 2 candidate interviews.

While the bigger impact on the organisations and people who use the services is harder to determine, it is apparent that the programme has begun to have a wider influence. There is also potential for this Vulnerable Adults and Community Care Practice (VACCP) programme to have a broader impact once more individuals within these organisations are given opportunities to complete PQSW programmes. The examples given of organisations being better able to identify and therefore work more effectively with vulnerable adults provide clear evidence of knowledge being shared throughout organisations. It is also part of the natural progression that such improved practice will have an impact on people who use services. The examples given here – understanding assessment procedures and identifying at risk groups – illustrate how people who use services have benefited from this increased knowledge and understanding. Of course, it is often difficult to ascertain whether a programme is

directly responsible for changes in practice, or if the changes would have occurred naturally over time. However, the examples given by candidates to illustrate the programme's impact do support the plausible view that the programme has been the major impetus in change.

In addition, the importance of reflective practice, sharing and learning from others' experiences and having the opportunity to review and understand policy and legislation have all provided an impetus for practice change. In particular, using assessment strategies that enable students to reflect on and analyse their practice has a powerful impact on their practice. As Carpenter recognises, 'there is a crucial difference between learning a skill in the classroom and using it in practice' with a whole ream of issues making this crossover difficult, including organisational constraints and opportunity, and client case load (Carpenter 2005, p16).

Including these elements within training does not, however, guarantee its success and in order for studies of impact to be realistic, they also need to take into account other factors that inhibit the application of learning to practice. Our findings support this, and Postle et al's (2002) research regarding tensions between employers and the demands of the course. Candidates were not always supported as effectively as they could in situations where managers did not have enough information about the programme. This meant that candidates were not always given the opportunities within their practice to build upon and implement their learning. Dissemination of the aims and objectives of any learning programmes need to be undertaken not just with workforce development departments. One of the outcomes of this evaluation has been the introduction of a line managers' handbook for this and other Bournemouth University PQSW programmes. Cooper and Rixon's (2001) views about the importance of concrete resources are, therefore, reinforced.

How we are best able to evaluate the impact of education and training is our final discursive consideration. We need to ask the right questions in the right way, ensuring that we take into account other external factors that affect learning being applied to practice. Qualitative research provides a forum for candidates to share and discuss their learning and explore their own examples and perceptions of programme impact. The flexibility of this approach, and the ability to place findings in context, is not always possible within other more traditional models of evaluation. Smith argues that focusing upon measurement, or more quantitative methods, is not wholly useful in a discipline with as many unquantifiable variables as there are in social work (Smith 1995). The possibility of using randomised control trials is suggested (Carpenter 2005), yet attempting to bring statistical significance to research on educational training impact may not necessarily be the right focus. It is conceivable that we are trying to quantify the unquantifiable.

However, it is important that we do not dismiss any method that may enable the evaluation of social work education at the higher levels of impact. Pitting quantitative against qualitative research and vying for validity can undermine the quality and potential of both, when both are clearly complex and diverse and have much to offer (Gabriel 2006). Qualitative work can be expensive and time consuming (Oglivie-Whyte 2006). Good evaluation is important to ensure that resources are not wasted upon programmes that are not having the desired impact upon practice. The literature calls for evaluations to show how well education and training is targeted and devised, producing the desired outcomes and transferring learning to practice (see Bailey 2003; Skinner 2004; Carpenter 2005). Although further work is clearly required to establish the most appropriate methods for evaluating education and training in such complex and varied work environments, mixed method approaches appear to have much to offer. As such, these findings show the value that PQSW

education and training can provide and how they can have a direct impact on practice.

CONCLUSION

This study provides an example of how the use of focused qualitative research can provide evidence of how education and training may have a positive impact on the practice of individuals, teams, organisations and people who use services. As such it acts as a basis for understanding some of the factors that can contribute to bringing learning into practice and those that may prevent it.

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Boxes to be inserted on page 6

BOX 1: Kirkpatrick (1983) – Outcome Levels

Level 1 – Reaction: Did the participants like the programme?

Level 2 – Learning: What did the participants learn?

Level 3 – Behaviour: Did the participants' behaviour change as a result of the programme?

Level 4 – Results: Have changes to the organisation occurred as a result of the programme?

BOX 2: Brown (1996) – Outcome Levels

Level 1 – Reactions: Reactions of trainees to the content and methods of training, to the trainer and to other factors perceived as relevant. *What did the trainee think of the training?*

Level 2 – Learning: Learning attained during the period. *Did the trainees learn what was intended? Did they demonstrate newly acquired skills?*

Level 3 – Behaviour: Job behaviour in the work environment at the end of the training period. *Did the learning transfer to the job?*

Level 4 – Effect: Effect on the trainees' department. *Has the training helped departmental performance?*

Level 5 – Outcomes: Has the training affected the ultimate well-being of the organisation, for example in terms of profitability or survival?