

# **Does practice learning make better practitioners? The need for research into practice learning in social work education in the UK**

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## **Introduction**

The modernising agenda, which characterised New Labour social policy in the early 2000s, engendered significant change in the social and health care sector in the UK. Since then, social work practice education has been significantly affected by this striving for improvement and transformation that continued through inquiries into tragedies, enhanced learning and overt political interference. Ostensibly, the intention of the changes was to enhance the quality of practice and competence of practitioners. However, the necessity of practice education is not often questioned nor is a clear explication of its purposes presented. Rather, it has been accepted as integral to social work education and represents an unquestioned 'given'. The nature of 'practice learning' is also rarely explored and the various types, models, duration and so on are often assumed rather than clearly stated. After reviewing some of the changing historical policy context for social work education and practice learning in the UK, this chapter begins to explore some of the reasons suggesting that practice education is necessary and posits some reasons that require further exploration and research if we are to develop and maintain a robust justification for this major requirement in social work education.

## **Changes in social work and social care**

Modernisation and change in social and health care was seen as a means of improving services, eliminating waste and maximising the use of public funds (Department of Health, 1998a). The White Paper *Modernising Social Services* (Department of Health, 1998b) heralded the enactment and gradual implementation of the Care Standards Act 2000, which promoted standards as a way of improving social work and social care by regulation of services and the workforce. The values behind the modernising initiatives relating to service improvement and the maximisation of use of public funds were broadly welcomed. However, whether or not modernisation and new managerialism led to improvements in service delivery or increased restriction and control is questionable (Watson, 2002; Humphrey, 2003; Whittington, 2003).

In the context of the modernisation agenda, important changes were made to social work education throughout the UK leading to devolved qualification systems within each of the four UK administrations, but all at graduate level. Whilst the academic qualifying award was situated within Higher Education (HE), there was continued professional body regulation in relation to accreditation of universities, validation of programmes and monitoring through university and external examiner reports. This has continued as professional and regulatory bodies have changed.

Government ministries have also kept an active interest in practice education, first requiring students to spend at least 200 days of their course in practice learning in at least two settings, experience statutory social work tasks and provide services to at least two service user groups. This has changed to 170 days with 30 skills-focused days allied to practice. Alongside this, universities are responsible for assessing students' 'fitness' to undertake practice learning which must include the opportunity

to develop understanding of service users and has involved an opportunity to 'shadow' an experienced social worker. These requirements assume the centrality of practice learning, drawing on a much earlier consultation and review of social work education (J M Consulting, 1999a, b), which found considerable variation in delivery of social work education, and criticisms of qualifying programmes. The review recommended upgrading core areas of education including practice which was reported to be confused, plagued by poor planning and preparation and assessment techniques and valuing practice learning being impoverished.

A major emphasis in the previous qualification, the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW), however, concerned the role of the practice teacher. Standards for practice educators and assessors have been updated ever since (Kearney, 2003; Doel, 2005; Parker et al., 2006; Field et al., 2014). Social work programmes must ensure that there are sufficient numbers of practice learning opportunities and practice educators. This is no easy task given the increase in practice learning days needed to meet demand. This situation has led to changes in the ways in which practice learning opportunities are conceptualised and operationalised, with a range of models developing including networked, co-site and student unit type placements and the use of off-site practice teachers and daily supervisors (Comben, 2005; Doel, 2005; Doel et al., 2007; Fairclough, 2006; McCafferty, 2005; Parker et al., 2006; Skinner and White, 2004; Taplin, 2018). For students, the challenges raised by an increase in practice learning time extend to matters of finance given the prolonged time spent on the programme and reduced opportunities to supplement their income by working (Wayne et al., 2006; Parker, 2007; Finch, 2017). Indeed, the costs of practice learning are an

important consideration all round and must be outweighed by the benefits as perceived by those engaging in it (Barton et al., 2005).

### **Problematising social work field placements**

It is taken almost as a given that practice learning is an integral and effective component of qualifying social work education. In general, this emphasis has been welcomed by social work employers, universities and by students. Service user and carer groups also welcome the stress on developing highly skilled practitioners (Department of Health, 2005; Hasler, 2003; Molyneux and Irvine; 2004; Hughes, 2019). However, the reasons why practice learning has been extended and why it is considered so important have not been adequately explained or questioned. The centrality of practice learning and costs to social work programmes demand that we are clear about the reasons why it is considered so important and must move beyond purely instrumental ones concerning award requirements; it must concern what practice learning achieves in terms of professional and practice development; how it contributes to learning and skills development and what the evidence base is in this regard.

A core question concerns the effectiveness of practice learning but this is contested and problematic not only from a philosophical perspective that may, perhaps erroneously, ally questions of effectiveness solely with positivistic notions. It also demands clarity of definition in respect of effectiveness – in what ways, using what definitions and from whose perspectives? Alongside these difficulties there is a more pragmatic one. There are no systematic randomised control trials relating to outcomes in practice learning nor are there studies with adequate definitions of effectiveness.

Discourses in practice education consider multiple stakeholder perspectives as to what matters in practice learning or what contributes to successful outcomes from a wide range of perspectives.

Assumptions of the necessity of practice learning have built up over many years of social work education in the UK around the domains of theory/practice integration and the development of professional knowledge (see, for example, Clement Brown and Gloyne, 1996; Sainsbury, 1966). In 1949, Eileen Younghusband published her first report into the state of social work in Britain suggesting that there was common, but not universal agreement, for including agency-based training in the plethora of courses and programmes in social work. The reasons given for this emphasis on practice training included some seemingly 'commonsense' assumptions, notably that it provided the opportunity for students to become conversant with the methods employed within an agency and to become familiar with the characteristics of a district. It was also recognised that learning in practice gave some responsibility for casework to the student, provided an all round view of the work, promoted skills development and afforded opportunities for group work and relationship forming. These assumptions of necessity have not been rigorously researched and remain tacit social work education lore. In 1951, Younghusband added a supplement to her report into the employment and training of social workers. Whilst there remained great diversity in the content of full-time professional courses, most included an element of practice training. Although training was diverse and not, in that day, generic, Younghusband did find there was a move away from an apprenticeship model to a more structured model of learning centred on the integration of theory into practice.

This was reflected in a survey into the international situation of social work training (Kendall, 1950, cited in Younghusband, 1951, 50):

*At one end of the scale, practical training is a closely supervised educational process, in which theory learned in the classroom is translated into successful social work practice. The students learn to interview, to record information, to separate out the various elements, environmental and emotional, that make up the problems with which they are called upon to deal, to use the social resources in the community, to participate with the client in carrying through a plan of social treatment and to work in close association with their colleagues in the various branches of social work and with professional colleagues in other fields as well. They also become increasingly aware of their own emotional responses to certain types of situation and certain kinds of behaviour and, through self-awareness, learn to overcome or correct their own prejudices and preconceived ideas as to proper conduct in order that all clients and all classes of problems may be treated with the same degree of respect and objectivity. At the other end of the scale, practical training may be little more than guided observation of the way in which a social agency operates. Where this is true, the students emerge from their practical training with a general view of the type of work that is performed by this or that social agency, but little, if any, experience of discharging the responsibilities that such work entails.*

This view recognises the importance of translating theory into practice, reflecting on practice and learning through practice. The lack of consistency in practice training or

field education, however, led Younghusband to call for the development of a research culture that would assist the integration of theory in practice by producing a knowledgeable, competent and analytic work force and develop the knowledge and evidence-base necessary to create the best learning environments for students. The integration of theory and practice continues to be central to effective practice learning. Indeed, to disaggregate the two concepts is dangerous to a professional discipline such as social work creating the potential for either cerebral and abstract conceptualisation without making a difference or 'commonsense' practice that disregards evidence (Fook, 2016; Parker, 2021). Providing opportunities for the integration of theory in practice settings represents one indicator of student satisfaction with practice learning (Regehr et al., 2002), and, concomitantly, a lack of integration or reduced opportunities for learning indicate dissatisfaction (Bogo, et al., 2002; 2004; March and Triseioltis, 1996). How this is achieved in practice learning has received attention by emphasising agency and classroom relationships or partnerships in creating an 'articulated' route to practice learning (Shardlow and Doel, 1996), and through the use of critical incident analysis methodology (Bolin, 2005; Noble, 2001). Bolin suggests that practice allows students to develop self-awareness and to negotiate learning experiences that build around prior classroom learning. She understands practice learning in the context of the situated nature of learning in which the student is part of the context for learning, immersing themselves in a community of learning and testing and reflecting on prior experiences and learning. Parker (2010) and Thompson (2000) provide a range of strategies and techniques for integrating theory in practice which depend on the particular learning styles of students. There is a need, however, for a systematic approach to researching how theory and practice

can best be integrated in the multiple settings and contexts in which practice learning takes place.

### **Why is practice learning considered integral to social work education?**

In 1982, Casson highlighted growing interest in developing reflective practitioners through experiential learning as a means of producing effective practitioners. This view derived from a model of education for professional practice which began to question the technical-rational model of knowledge dissemination and acquisition and suggested that effective practice involves intuitive, tacit knowledge that is not always open to explicit formulation (Agyris and Schön, 1974; Schön, 1983; 1987; 2002). Therefore suggesting that professional schools should teach students to think like professionals and facilitate the process by which students might develop their own theories of practice. The emphasis on developing and inculcating reflective skills and learning has continued and provides a rich vein of evidence to continue to promote in practice learning (Ruch, 2002; Dix, 2018; Parker, 2021), although the complexities and problems recognised in assessing and adequately defining reflective practice (see Eraut, 1995; Ixer, 1999, 2003) indicate the need for further focused, systematic research especially linking reflective practice skills with longitudinal benefits in competent practice and in being able to integrate theory and practice.

Taking into account the need to integrate theory into practice and develop reflective professionals, we may also find supporting evidence for practice learning or field education in social work when considering developments and research in higher education. In higher education in the UK there has been a long history of experiential, work-based or practice learning, which, as Beatty (2003, p. 135) suggests ‘requires a

complex interweaving of knowledge, technical skills and application of professional ethics'. The Dearing Report (1997, p. 15) was clear in its statement that '(t)he strongest single message we received from employers was the value of work experience.' Indeed, one of the reasons why practice is deemed necessary in social work education is because employers want to see social workers who are fit for purpose, able to do the job and, therefore, safe, able to work collaboratively, within the appropriate legal framework in a competent, skilled and knowledgeable manner and able to account for their continued learning needs.

The arguments for work-based learning are to improve the employability of graduates or to enhance national economic effectiveness. Employers and graduates have argued consistently for a better set of generic skills for the workplace, and learning theorists have argued that 'learning by doing' (using Kolb's (1984) learning cycle or some alternative such as Boud and Walker, 1998) reinforces classroom understanding by contextualising knowledge and promoting application and reflection. Variants of the learning cycle have been regularly employed in social work education (Parker, 2010), although Miller et al. (2005) consider it to be limited and that a more worthwhile pursuit would be to study practice teacher/student relationship as a vehicle of learning. Whilst it appears to be assumed that agency-based learning, with high-intensity involvement of practitioners is better able to produce effective outcomes in practice learning, this still needs to be rigorously tested across a range of variables and from the perspective of all involved.

According to Gray (2001; see also Ebbutt 1996) work-based learning has four aims and types:

- As a mode of access to study or as accelerated access
- As initial professional preparation
- As a general preparations for the world of work
- As a major constituent of a programme of study

Practice learning in social work in the UK certainly accords with these aims. For Gray, however, work-based learning is more than the simple acquisition of skills but is essentially centred around reflection as reviewing and learning from experience. It is based on the assumption that learning arises from action and problem-solving in the work environment and sees knowledge as a shared or collective activity. It is the acquisition of a meta-competence – learning to learn. This is central to continuing professional development and to social work practice as is evidenced by the continuing debates concerning reflection in, on and about social work as an integral feature of integrating theory and practice (Ixer, 1999; Ruch, 2002). Whilst HE has, at times, disparaged experiential learning and suggested that it lacks credibility (Clark and Whitelegg, 1998), Gray states that there is no *a priori* reason to consider that it is ineffective and action learning can lead to a search for theoretical understanding. Despite this, and Dearing's (1997) rationale, the development of experiential learning in HE has been tense; whilst learning in the natural world is situational and context-dependent, pure academic learning is intentional and represents a second order experience of the world, something extrapolated from the world and theorised. Beatty (2003, p. 136), similarly to Bolin (2005), states, however, that:

the key to effective learning is the support given to the student to draw out learning from the experience and in linking **critical incidents** in the experience to ideas and theories which shed light on them.

Evidence from HE indicates that employers value practice based learning as skills preparation and developing applied knowledge, and, despite some tension, universities accept that work-based and experiential learning can be effective in integrating theory and further developing knowledge through reflection in and on action. This provides an important rationale for including practice learning high on the social work curriculum. What is needed to answer the question concerning the necessity of practice learning in social work education more fully, however, is research into whether or not it is effective in meeting the outcome criteria set by the various stakeholder groups involved in practice learning, whether they be students themselves, practice teachers, agency managers and practitioners or programme management committees. Cartney's (2000) plea to focus on learning and teaching strategies that promote student learning is crucial and we need to determine whether effective extrapolation can be based around theoretical propositions or requires learning in practice, especially given the costs involved.

Competence, though not without its critics (Yelloly and Henkel, 1995), became a watchword in social work education as it professionalised. CCETSW's Paper 30 (CCETSW, 1989) considered competence to comprise the integration of knowledge, skills and values (CCETSW, 1989) and this continued in the degree in England (Department of Health, 2002; Topss England, 2002). Illeris (2003) adds that it also involves personal qualities and the ability to perform adequately and flexibly in well-

known and unknown situations. For Illeris there are two fundamental assumptions concerning learning. Firstly, all learning includes two essentially different types of process – the external interaction between learner and social, cultural and material environment and internal psychological process of acquisition and elaboration in which new impulses are connected with the results of prior experience and learning. Second, Illeris believes that all learning includes three dimensions, the cognitive (knowledge and skills), the emotional (feelings and motivation) and the social (communication and co-operation). These dimensions are intertwined and embedded within a societally situated context (see Bolin, 2005). If, indeed, this is the case then practice learning is the key forum for learning for social workers. Students are able to interact with the complexities of the work environment and reflect on these and test their experiences against prior classroom learning. This demands bringing into play the range of human characteristics and, importantly in social work, concerns the use of a reflection on values, moving from knowledge acquisition to active learning, continued questioning and reflection. Practice learning allows the student to break down knowledge, skills and values applying them to context-specific situations, learning and developing as a professional from continued critical questioning. In social work, the growth of research and interest in self-efficacy provides potential for developing student confidence and testing competence (Holden et al., 1996; 1997; 2002; 2003; Parker, 2005; 2006a; Parker et al., 2007). Considering student learning styles may be a valuable part of the teaching process although evidence here is equivocal (Cartney, 2000). The impact of the institutional context on learning has also not been fully explored and it may be that learning styles are malleable and fluid rather than fixed entities (Boud and Walker, 1998). Approaches to learning can assist in developing effective teaching methods in a range of settings (Ramsden, 2003), but

do not, of themselves, constitute the rationale for a particular mode of delivery such as practice learning.

Educating people for safe practice, fitness for purpose and developing collaborative practice have been highlighted within inquiry reports (Stanley and Manthorpe, 2003) and underpinned the review of the previous social work qualification (JM Consulting, 1999a). An evidence base describing how practice learning inculcates safe practice is, however, needed. For instance, the inquiry into the personality disorder unit at Ashworth Special Hospital indicated a high priority for social work training was the use of theory in practice (Fallon et al., 1999). The inquiry report concerning Christopher Clunis and the death of Jonathan Zito suggested that whilst most social workers, especially social workers approved under the Mental Health Act 1983, were appropriate in their actions, those who were untrained or lacking in experience did not receive sufficient guidance or supervision from senior staff (Ritchie et al., 1994). However, there is increasing evidence that service user and carer involvement in the assessment of fitness for practise in practice learning enhances the student experience and begins to lay the foundations fro collaborative working (Advocacy in Action et al., 2006; Furniss and Gilligan, 2004).

These reports suggest that social workers need adequate training, supervision and assistance in developing collaborative practice, and we can extrapolate from this the need for rigorous professional training and education in which practice learning is central and suggest the processes of teamwork, accountability and the delegation of responsibilities in practice represent areas for further study. The report into the death of Victoria Climbié (Laming, 2003, recommendation 14) calls for effective joint

training at a national level, continuous up-dating in professional practice (recommendation 15), and recommendation 31 that emphasises that vocational aspects of training, continuing through an induction period and into professional practice, are central to developing effective practitioners. Whilst the emphasis is welcome, the evidence for the production of safe practitioners and the research, rationale and principles on which it is based are not drawn out; they are assumed. In a study concerning the training needs of newly qualified social workers the emphasis on continued supervised development was confirmed and at least one placement in the statutory sector seen as central (Brown et al., 2007)

The degree emphasises learning for collaborative practice and research commissioned by the Department of Health demonstrates that this can be facilitated by developing creative practice learning opportunities in multi-disciplinary settings (Whittington, 2003). This has the potential to assist in meeting the government agenda of working together and may assist the development of collaborative working but, of course, research is needed from all those involved in the practice learning experience to evaluate its effectiveness and feasibility given different structures (Cook, et al., 2001; Freeth et al., 2005).

In terms of safe practice, looking after oneself, as a novice practitioner, is rarely considered. However, Maidment (2003) questions the adequacy of practice learning and suggests, on the basis of her research in Australia, that social work programmes need to teach students how to survive and negotiate in workplace cultures and not only teach skills and knowledge in conducting interviews and assessments.

### **Is practice learning really necessary?**

According to Rai (2004) social work education has always emphasised the importance of field experience within the curriculum for preparing students for practice. This, he believes, is constant throughout the world, although this is perhaps a view influenced by Western practice and the duration of practice learning or field education varies greatly. Rai suggests that without field placements social work education would be just a mental exercise. The purpose is to contextualise classroom learning (see also Bolin, 2005; Fortune, et al., 2001; Regehr et al., 2002; Valentine, 2004):

It is generally agreed that field instruction is the most significant, most productive, and most memorable component of social work education.’ (Rai, 2004, 213)

Research into practice learning remains unsystematic and under-theorised, however, as does much research into social work education as a whole (see Gambrill, 2002; Carpenter, 2005). The evidence base is partial and research concerning practice learning generally reflects the positions of single stakeholders such as effectiveness according to universities, or practice teachers, or agencies, or students without always considering the pluralistic concerns of all stakeholders (see, for instance, Bogo, et al, 2004; Fortune, et al, 2001; Rai, 2004; Regehr, et al, 2002; Parker, 2006a).

A great deal of current research into practice learning concerns satisfaction which is associated with a planned, systematic and stimulating approach to learning (see Bogo et al, 2004; Parker, 2006a). This does not, however, necessarily clarify the purposes of practice learning nor what makes it effective. Positive outcomes in practice learning

appear to be associated with practice teacher/field instructor behaviours, relationships between practice teachers and students, the range and nature of learning opportunities; organisation and structure of the experience and relationships between universities and agencies (Bogo et al., 2002; Fortune et al., 2001, Knight, 2001; Lefevre, 2005; Parker, 2006a). A useful line of enquiry is developing into self efficacy and effective practice learning (Holden et al., 1996; 1997; 2002; 2003; Parker 2006a), and as a means of conjoint assessment (Parker 2006b) as well as a fundamental element of achievement motivation (Fortune et al., 2005).

More fundamental questions relating to the centrality of practice learning or field education on social work programmes are beginning to be asked (Lager and Robbins, 2004; Fairtlough, 2006; Parker, 2006a; Wayne et al., 2006). In North America, Wayne et al. (2006) argue for a systematic rather than piecemeal approach to practice learning in the context of changes which, to an extent, echo those in the UK. Changes in agencies resulting from increased demands, rising case loads and prescriptive curricula impact on numbers of placements available. University requirements for enhanced research outputs mirror the competing pressures of the UK Research Assessment Exercise and maintaining teaching excellence, in some institutions marginalising the practice elements of programmes. Changes in the student body reflect the financial and social pressures experienced by students in the UK. These factors, argue Wayne et al. constrain radical debate and change whilst this is what is required. They describe a workshop calling for cooperative ventures and research within universities, with practice agencies to develop new models for practice learning and measuring competence: something we can enjoin with in the UK.

Barton et al. (2005) compared the costs and benefits of placements in Australia, surveying 43 field work supervisors and indicating the perceived benefits to be the additional work undertaken by students, enhancement of supervisors' professional development, reflection in practice and unanticipated benefits of pre-employment trials. The former aspects perhaps well recognised but the latter representing an area ripe for further research concerning our understanding of and outcomes from practice learning (see Parker et al., 2006).

### **International placements**

By extension, if local/national placements are considered crucial to student learning, a further rationale may be that international placements add further value in terms of gaining cultural competence, a wider understanding of welfare provision typologies together with global social work responses. Certainly, international placements have proved to be very popular among students, where HE institutions have been key players in promoting the benefits of globalisation through international engagement, usually through international HE partnership development (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2012).

Although the terms 'cultural competence' and indeed 'internationalisation' are portmanteau terms in encompassing many different interpretations, we have conceptualised the former as embracing a critical commitment towards exploring preconceived notions of cultural difference through encounters with different practices, creating an emerging *praxis* facilitating students' evolving understanding of diversity and difference (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2014).

Although there has been a consistent demand for international placements (interrupted recently by the Covid-19 pandemic), there has also been a need for advocates of HE internationalisation to convincingly argue the case for international placements during times of austerity. Successful international placements are staff-intensive and expensive operations, both at the outgoing as well as the reviving end of the partnership. Vocational programmes, like social work, which may lead to professional registration nationally, thus carry additional requirements of rigour that cannot always be easily accommodated by international partners, compared to pure academic programme exchanges. Moreover, a small but significant body of critique has scrutinised the inequity of many international placements arrangements as embedded in imperialist assumptions (Razack, 2009) where it is predominantly wealthy countries of the Global North who benefit by placing students in developing Global South countries, but where reciprocation in turn is unaffordable, leading to a unidirectional flow of student traffic and academic/economic advantage (Ashencaen Crabtree et al, 2014; Parker et al., 2014).

Irrespective of the important question of equity and exploitation of international placements, HE justification for the continuation of high investment placements are often framed in terms of two main factors:

- A) Enhanced student experiences: increased student satisfaction with programmes of study; gaining useful ‘global citizenship’, intercultural experiences; gaining new academic understandings and perspectives; increased confidence, maturity and motivation.

B) Enhanced student employability prospects: global/international practice experiences; unusual/hard to access experiences; cross-cultural transferability of knowledge and skills; improved language abilities; professional mobility skills.

A very important but less mentioned outcome of international placements, particularly in unfamiliar cultural contexts, is the ability to successfully negotiate liminal states of being between worlds/understandings/status that the student will suddenly be immersed in. This liminal process can occur in any placement situation as well as the normal transition from graduating student to new professional. Yet it is likely to be experienced more acutely and with greater initial disorientation in contexts of multiple differences (Parker et al., 2013). The successful acquisition of an individual's ability to tolerate the emotional discomforts of liminality is not achievable by all students on international placements, as we have discovered in our own international work. Based on our learning therefore, we believe that cultural competence is integrally connected to the student's ability to be able to engage with different cultures through holding their initial judgements in suspension, thereby more ably reflecting upon their assumptions of 'superior' (familiar) and 'inferior' (unfamiliar) practice (Razack, 2009). We find that when that occurs, students on international placements are better able to evaluate differences in practice more objectively, scrutinising their own inculcated notions of the normative nature of social work practice (Hugman 2008); and are more capable of transferring their learning across international boundaries and cultural groupings (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2016).

If adjustment can be made, students stand to gain immensely by learning to tolerate the ambiguities and uncertainties posed by the new contexts, bringing to bear stronger critical reflection leading to more nuanced and thoughtful practice skills that acknowledge and honouring the complexities and the unknowns that characterise the human condition in all its diverse manifestations.

## **Summary**

Practice learning is accepted as fundamental to social work education and a range of reasons are offered to justify this acceptance. Practice learning is the site in which theoretical and classroom based learning is translated into practice, refined and reflected upon in a way that inculcates professional development, experience and wisdom. Practice learning is acknowledged as providing an introduction to the workplace and possibly a ‘testing’ ground for employment and/or employability (Barton, et al. 2005; Parker et al., 2006). However, the lack of systematic research and engagement with multiple stakeholders involved in practice learning has led to a fragmented state of affairs in which the evidence base remains weak. Sherer and Peleg-Oren (2005) recognise that field education is central for transmitting theoretical knowledge into practice (see also Bolin, 2005), but the issue of what students actually do during field work has received minimal attention. Reflection in, on and about practice is well-rehearsed (Ruch, 2002) but attention to definitional issues and development of a systematic compendium of knowledge is needed (D’Cruz et al., 2006; Ixer, 1999). Parker et al. (2006) consider the evidence linking practice learning and workforce planning and employment, but recognise, again, the need for more robust research. There is a need to determine the prior questions, undertake descriptive work and describe the logic of practice learning opportunities, such as

what are they; what are they meant to achieve; how is it done and why is practice learning effective? If we are to answer fully the question ‘is practice learning really necessary?’ we need to describe clearly what it is in the particular context in which it is undertaken. The multiplicity of changes over time and the introduction of a new qualification for social work, alongside a growing recognition of the value of work-base learning throughout higher education, provide an important opportunity to do so.

The assumptions of the necessity of practice learning in social work education take their starting point from governmental and professional body directives as to what is required to achieve a desired outcome. The evidence-base underlying these assumptions is, as discussed throughout, limited and requires a systematic approach to collation. The rationale underpinning practice learning is much more than adherence to instrumental aspects of programme management such as meeting standardised requirements. Research is needed that draws together our knowledge of practice learning, linking it to the context in which it is undertaken and articulating the rationale for its deployment whether locally or internationally. Given the economic costs of practice learning, the commitment of government, professional bodies, practitioners and academics to practice learning a programme of research examining the effectiveness of practice learning is fundamental if we are to create an evidence base for future development and justify the costs. Perhaps the rather haphazard and inchoate approaches to date reflect the comfort of customary practice, a concern not to find disconfirmatory evidence. Whatever the reason a scientific approach demands robust and rigorous research and the need to take decisions, make developments and construct practice based on such studies.

The contentious question posed in this paper is meant to evoke discussion and debate, it is, however, serious, as we need to understand why what we do and promote in educating social workers is important or necessary, given the emphasis placed upon it and the resource put into it. We need research that indicates why it is important, what happens within it, and what the outcomes are for all those involved. We cannot afford to consider aspects of the curriculum as immutable givens but must scrutinise and evaluate critically both the curriculum and the educational philosophies underpinning it.

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