

Professionalising social work education without losing our soul:

A critical reflection on the role and purpose of practice placements in the context of Teaching Partnerships

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Abstract: This critical reflection explores the benefits and challenges of Teaching Partnerships considering whether this change is towards professionalisation or marketisation. A recurring question of social work is its purpose. To change culture or to help the individual. One drawing on systemic radical social work skills, the other relationship-based social justice skills. Placements are an important part for practicing, developing and consolidating academic learning - 'social work in practice', a place to hone employability skills.

Keywords: social work education; social work placements; marketisation; student social worker; professionalisation; Teaching Partnership

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Background

In England and Wales, where both academics practice, student social workers must complete two practice placements of 70 and 100 days, each taking part in the second and third years of the BA (Hons) and each year of the two year MA Social Work. The authors are academics within the first three years of teaching in two universities, coming directly from practice. One is a Practice Learning Co-ordinator (PLC) overseeing the matching and management of placements, under the original system, the first placement being in the non-statutory/voluntary sector and the second with statutory/government partners. The other authors lectures in a university which aims to provide statutory experience in both placements, matched by the Local Authority (municipality) through a Teaching Partnership (TP). These are accredited collaborations between universities and employers, attracting Department for Education (DfE) funding, whose focus arguably is to improve the quality of social work training. While some practitioners argue two statutory placements better prepare students for 'real social work', others argue that 'real social work' happens beyond Local Authority provision and losing this insight, risks losing the soul of social work. This reflection is not the experience of all students or academics. It is sharing a concern drawn from the writers' first year of transferring from practice into teaching. As such, it may be a reflection of our own

expectations and bias, and intends to stimulate discussion. Being aware of our positionality has been developed in us both undertaking teaching in higher education qualifications which has raised awareness of historical realism in line with our experiences of changes in practice. Approaching education from a critical stance, using Johari window to explore reflexivity (referred to in Skills for Care, 2018), the concern we both had when starting our academic career, was that we were both perhaps altruistic considering social justice as central in social work education. We now question in this paper the extent to which education truly emancipates or prepares students for the world of social work.

This paper explores where learning and practice meet. The extent to which learning prepares for practice and practice reflects learning. We explore how learning has been politicised, drawing on Freire (1993) and how organisations may naturally focus on 'doing' when education's aim is 'being' (Hingley-Jones and Ruch, 2016). This reflection is through the lens of placement revision following the introduction of Teaching Partnerships. This piece does not conclude which approach is best but encourages professional curiosity, hoping to stimulate discussion.

Introduction

Social work is not homogeneous; although the underpinning framework encompasses principles of social justice and human rights (IFSW, 2014); there are a multiplicity of settings, purpose and complexities, which locate social work practice and education in diverse economic, cultural, social and policy contexts. In recent years, there has been a shift from increased fragmentation within social work placements to a more singular professionalisation (Ferguson, 2016); a term arguably aligned to a popular political agenda, determined by a certain type of knowledge, skills and professional ethos, namely found in local government (Thompson, 2009).

This anti-collectivist, dehumanising ideological shift has been a historically recurring tension in social work since its inception - from the Victorian 'problem of the poor' (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2007, p.409) to 1980s Thatcherism of 'there is no such thing as society'. Arguably, this change in placement context further galvanises organisational managerialism driving the move away from traditional community work (Parker and Doel, 2013), perhaps considered to be of less value to fee paying students. It is worth noting, in our experience, students compare placements both in terms of perceived value and complexity relating to how they see 'real social work', perhaps mimicking existing cultural beliefs and attitudes towards what may be considered more deserving and less deserving; children over adults, statutory over charitable, interventionist over emancipatory.

In becoming academics, we assumed students would start their social work journey with a passion for social change being a primary driver; the soul of social work. However, the space to reflect on this area is often not available or considered as a primary focus (Ioakimidis, 2016). This is arguably more available in a charitable sector placement. Resistance towards these experiences is, however, seen amongst students, who often consider them inferior (Scholar, et al., 2012) and affecting their future job prospects (Finch, 2017). It therefore poses the question are students

interested in social change or simply not given space to develop? And how or if we measure social justice as a key capability?

While recruitment guidance does not emphasise the effect of placement type on job prospects, anecdotally students believe they are more likely to gain employment from their statutory experience. They are encouraged to consider all options as learning but continue to link statutory placements to future employment. A position supported by policy-makers and employers (Scholar, et al., 2014).

Increasingly students ask for a say in type of placement irrespective of whether this is an option, influencing university practice (Clarke, 2017). The correlation between employability and the placement experience (Narey, 2014), alongside the stigmatisation of 'non-traditional' placements has contributed to a shift towards a professionalising climate and the view that 'real social work' takes place within local authorities (McLaughlin, et al., 2015).

Professional identity

This takes us on to the development of social worker identity coming back to an often-discussed reflection on whether social work is rooted in social justice and aligned with a radical perspective, or working with individuals in a relationship-based, solution-focused environment; or perhaps is there a third way that avoids unhelpful polarisation for a more integrated approach? Taking John Donne's (1624) poetic assertion that 'no man is an island', there is cause to reflect on the purpose of social work being of both paradigms, context and person, of which social workers align as collectivists or individualists.

Traditionally, student social workers experienced 'educational space' (Gulczynska, 2015, p43) to develop and express their radical nature. This raises the question whether current understandings support the drive towards questioning the status quo and reflecting critically on the how and why. Students need to be supported to return to the truism how you solve a problem depends on how you see it.

Ask any social worker about their university course and you will hear stories from placement, both good and bad lending itself to the immersive experience of placements (Laurillard, 2012). Placements consolidate, question, challenge and put into perspective learning in the classroom. Placements are transformational, developing both personal and professional identities while helping to make meaning of theory and its application to practice. The purpose of placements provides both the opportunity for ongoing critical conversation and integration of knowledge and capability, to later draw upon in real-time (Pyles, 2016).

It is also worth considering at this point, in brief, the identity brought to placements by the students. Wiles (2013) raises the importance of cultural understanding and the implications of intersectionality on how a placement is experienced. It can also link to students' approach to learning in that when pressured to complete pieces of work associated with the placement it is tempting for the work to lead the learning, changing students into

learning for assessment (Northedge, 2003). This is such a vast area in itself we raise it only to further understand that students bring their own cultural capital in parallel with organisational culture and expectation, and the influence of each upon the other.

Ethics and values

Students develop values in line with their experience of organisations in both purpose and ethics similar to 'how we do things here'. The nature of learning opportunities directly influence how students consider the centrality of their core values (Beverley and Worsley, 2007). In statutory settings, there is a tension for student social workers seen through the dichotomy of statutory responsibility and social change; valuing prioritisation on upholding the bureaucratic processes with concern for resources and efficiency (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2013). Therefore, being also the primary employer post-qualifying, a statutory placement sets the tone of what is valued.

If statutory experience is highly regarded and realistically more likely to result in employment, with students approaching statutory placements as a long interview, they risk losing the freedom to learn through testing and reflecting (Laurillard, 2012). Students perhaps feel compelled then to present as fully formed earlier than the skills they possess. In parallel, there is a debate that Practice Educators in statutory settings align themselves with the role of assessor with some assuming their role is to measure capability thereby reinforcing the student view that the statutory placement is less a place to practice than a place to demonstrate (Finch, 2017). Students then appear to seek other avenues for advice over their Practice Educator for fear of repercussions. There is anecdotal concern, from our experience of placement tutoring, of Practice Educators almost re-interviewing students for the course and questioning whether the skills learned on a non-statutory placement are transferrable. Conversely, newly qualified social workers while valuing statutory placements, refer to having more face-to-face contact with individuals in non-statutory settings (Berry-Lound et al., 2016). It is worth considering this in light of the move to TPs.

Opportunity

Social work being so broad can become involved at all stages of life and in all manner of contexts, from cradle to grave. What is apparent from the scope of voluntary organisations available in one of the areas is the recognition that some work has become largely the sole domain of the voluntary sector, such as working directly with the homeless, drug and alcohol treatment and women's refuges. It is worth noting that historically social work courses included community development and criminal justice placements (Smith, 2017). It is important to note that the experience of voluntary placements offers an insight into relationship-based social work (Bryan et al, 2016).

The move to twin statutory experiences is relatively new. Twomey-Fosnot (2005) highlights the need for learners to access multi-dimensional learning opportunities. Completed in either placement, this requires close management in both to ensure students complete work appropriate to their

level, in both sectors. From the authors' experience, students often find the scaffolding approach to learning as frustrating, some wanting to run before they can walk. Without a clear delineation between both initial/final and between placement contexts, the risk is that students who are perceived as more able are afforded experiences beyond their knowledge and skills. There is also a risk that this further reinforces the view that some placements are more valuable than others. This can be overcome by careful management but starts with a shared understanding of the purpose of placements and their centrality in social work education.

Marketisation

Webber (2018) argues that 'social work needs to be freed from organisational constraints in order to be more effective'. However, with students becoming fee payers and arguably 'consumers', the prevailing marketisation of social work education (Cleary, 2018) may align learning to business needs. Arguably proceduralising social work into administrative tasks reducing 'intellectual complexity' (Molesworth, et al., 2009, p277). It is therefore the 'perfect storm' of austerity meeting market demand meeting student intersectionality in the hope to be better prepared for work, see Figure 1. As a result, students may not fully realise for example that there is a history perspective to practice or the fundamental sociological perspectives underpinning practice (Dunk-West and Verity, 2018). They thus remain within the confines of their practice and find solutions difficult to navigate at a community level, as their training is solely service-based interventions. An example of this is the perennial revisiting of community resources and social workers being unsure of what is available when the charitable sector is by its nature reflexive (Beck et al, 1994). There is therefore a very possible risk that students will mirror a 'passive dependency' (Cunningham & Cunningham, 2017, p.56) in their relationship with the state; creating social work technicians operating in line with the organisation's 'deliberately constructed and reconstructed ... goals and values [sic]' (Eldridge & Crombie, 1974, p.23), with little concern for the ideology of relational and radical social work.

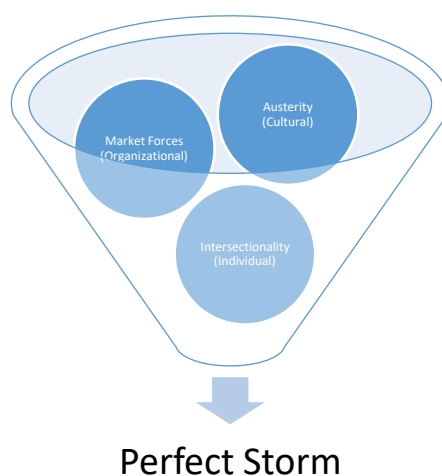


Figure 1: Perfect Storm Model (Bald & Howells, 2018)

On one hand, Ioakimidis (2016) outlines that meaningful social work practice encompasses political action and Parker & Doel (2013) speak of social justice being integral to the very purpose of social work. On the other hand, Bude (2008) suggests fear drives the direction of society so arguably to professionalise and equip students for the reality of statutory work stems from genuine fear of 'getting it wrong'.

This raises the alternative argument as to whether the charitable sector in fact works with the level of risk and demand involved in statutory and whether the risk is as critical. It is worth reflecting that to be a social worker, mostly students need to work in the statutory sector and therefore professionalisation is a legitimate stepping up in their preparedness. Perhaps therefore it is the classroom that is being left behind and 'out of touch'. While efforts are made to bring practice into the classroom, such as practitioners being heavily involved in the classroom through the TP, there is potential to say there is a gap in academics going into the field, such as practitioner researchers. It is worth at this point, reiterating this paper is a reflection on current placement practice in social work education, this does not assume one right way but concludes that each approach, be it one or two providers, requires shared understanding and oversight of how students learn and the purpose of placements in wider social work education. Perhaps in turn, the true area of focus is the ways in which academic learning crosses or matches the experience in 'practice', such as matching the ideology to 'real world' practice. Fuller evaluation of TPs will follow as the programmes develop and funding concludes. Personally speaking, both areas have experienced change as a result of the TPs, such as capacity issues and, of pertinence to this paper, a return to discussing the purpose of placements.

Professionalisation

Following the expansion of the social work Teaching Partnerships programme developed by the Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care, the provision of statutory placements remains a key requirement in raising the quality of social work education and practice, and central to social work policy.

There is an argument that the increased statutory experience is providing students with a stronger professional identity (Scholar, et al., 2014) and are adapting their response to high risk becoming arguably a more resilient workforce (Hodgson and Watts, 2017). Resilience in itself requires both structural support and individual self-knowledge. As discussed, while there is a risk students fear being labelled as struggling (Finch, 2017), by over-protecting them from the realities of social work there is an argument that students risk becoming removed from the experience of being a social worker in a statutory team, such as meeting resistance or distress, returning the conversation to exploring the purpose of placements.

Guidance

At this point, on reflection, it is worth seeking advice from the current

regulatory body about what constitutes a good placement and its purpose. Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) (2018), the current social work regulatory body for England and Wales, makes no mention of the distinction but focuses on vague expectations to learning, for example 'practice-based learning must be integral to the programme'. This suggests that placement-learning opportunities are open to interpretation by those organisations not committed through a Teaching Partnership arrangement. When considering the underpinning framework in practice, the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) (2007) notes the purpose of social work as three streams of values: traditional (ethics), emancipatory (values) and governance (managerial/organisational). This further highlights the significance of students engaging with multi-dimensional learning opportunities to develop and consider their fundamental core values and professional ethics.

Both SCIE (2007) and HCPC (2018) are not specific but focus on local opportunity against clear criteria of learning outlined in the British Association of Social Work (BASW) Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) (2018), which guide capabilities for best practice. This is disappointing given the domains focusing on professional learning and organisation and context are so broad. It is unclear at this stage how the change to Social Work England will bridge this gap but the lack of guidance is noticeable in its absence and therefore open to interpretation. Having said that, the move to standardisation through the regulatory bodies while offering a clear framework for students to aim for and demonstrate capability risks reducing practice to a tick box exercise, and potentially missing the nuances of practice.

Conclusion

To draw together the points so far, there is a tension between the types of learning needed to practice as a qualified social worker. However, this is contentious in itself, as social work will differ between person, team, agency, county and from year to year. This raises the issue of placements and their role in developing professionalisation and employability.

Is it therefore the prerogative of the classroom to remain independent of employment and does this fly in the face of an increasing call on placements to decide whether a student should pass or fail and in doing so the course? This asks whether universities are integral to providing social work training or whether this is gained from on the job learning, such as Frontline, founded in 2013 as an alternative to university qualification, being a two year employment based training programme. Ultimately, this returns to the discussion of Parker and Doel (2013) as to whether social work is a profession or a semi-profession. Whatever the placements may gain in contextual learning, the classroom can continue to provide perspective and critical reflection. Arguably, losing non-statutory placements severs the link to the origins of social work.

There is a risk that with placements being wholly set in Local Authority provision, the dominant discourse becomes that of professionalisation and employability within the organisational context - to the exclusion of overarching social work themes of social justice and reflexivity. In the current 'perfect storm' (See Figure 1), without creating a brave space (Arao

and Clemens, 2013) to hold the tension between the being, the knowing and the doing (Hingley-Jones and Ruch, 2016), we risk losing our voice in the way social work education is delivered, impacting on how social workers practice tomorrow.

In conclusion, it is our concern that placements risk being reduced to a tick box exercise demonstrating employability, polarising professional skills and business need. In times of austerity, it is not surprising that students will look to their future earning capacity and risking professional curiosity requires the university and the organisation to jointly afford a safe space along with the student being brave. In these times, we question how much this is the student reality and whether we risk losing our voice as a result. It is therefore imperative that placement providers agree on the purpose of learning in practice and develop a shared understanding and expectation for questioning the status quo – or we risk losing our soul.

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