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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