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The Good, the Bad and the Ugly – the experiences of social work practice educators in three organisations in England

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the experiences of social work practice educators (PEs) in three organizations in England and focuses on the reasons PEs continue in their role alongside the challenges they encounter. This is important given broader persistent concerns about workforce recruitment and retention within the field of social work. The qualitative findings are categorized into three overarching themes: 'the Good', 'the Bad' and 'the Ugly'. The research not only identified the positive reasons why PEs continue to stay in the role and the wider benefits but also highlighted the significant challenges PEs are facing. These include feeling undervalued, a lack of understanding and appreciation of their complex roles, and the considerable time demands of the role alongside the increasing pressures of the 'day' job. The article concludes that there is a significant risk that the 'bad' and the 'ugly' may outweigh the 'good', making the issue of retention of PEs even more problematic, which in turn may impact recruitment into social work. The paper suggests ways forward in light of the findings but, concerningly, highlights the fragility of the current system, which appears to rely on goodwill.

Introduction

There have been longstanding concerns about the recruitment and retention of social workers (Webb & Carpenter, 2012) as vacancy and turnover rates in social work continue to rise in England (Webber, 2023). Government data showed that the number of children and family social workers declined in 2022, whilst the number of vacancies grew by 21% (7,900), and the number of agency workers rose by 13% (6,800) from the previous year (HM Government, 2023). Additionally, average caseloads and sickness absence rates also increased (HM Government, 2023). In adult social work, there is a similar picture, with 2,000 (11.6%) vacant jobs in local authorities as of September 2022 (Skills for Care, 2023). Concern about the workforce being able to meet demand is so significant that the Department of Education (2024) raised the level of risk from 'moderate' to 'critical', with a likelihood that shortages across the sector will worsen. This concern is also a global

one, for example, in Romania (Prutenau, 2023), the United States of America (Chernesky & Israel, 2009; US Bureau of Employment Statistics, 2023), Australia (Allies for Children, 2021), South Africa (Mokgwatshane, 2025) and New Zealand (Social Workers Registration Board, 2022; O'Donoghue 2024). It is of the upmost importance to explore what can be done to increase recruitment and retention.

Practice Educators (PEs), also known as field educators or supervisors, play an important role in recruitment. In the English context, PEs assess student social workers, newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) undertaking the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment in England, and mentor and assess those undertaking post-qualifying training, namely, trainee PEs, Approved Mental Health Professionals (AMHPs)[1] and Best Interest Assessors (BIAs).[2] PEs, therefore, are pivotal in ensuring continued recruitment, and to a lesser extent, retention in social work.

In the UK and elsewhere, there is continuing austerity, with local authority budget cuts (Ogden & Philips, 2024), significant vacancy rates in social work, increased demand in relation to disability caused by long COVID (Owens et al., 2024), alongside increased thresholds for service (Devaney, 2019; Hood et al., 2022) and unmanageable caseloads (Social Workers Union, 2024). The situation is thus becoming acute in terms of the retention of experienced PEs. Given longstanding concerns about the quantity and quality of placements (Finch & Taylor, 2013), PEs' lack of experience and confidence to fail social work students when required (Finch et al., 2021), alongside their role in supporting the workforce as identified earlier, means that the need for a stable, experienced and confident practice education workforce remains urgent. To that end, the research explored PEs' experiences across three organizations in England with a focus on: (1) motivations for continuing in the role; (2) how local authorities can retain, support and reward PEs; and (3) how universities can support PEs.

The article begins with a brief overview of the context of social work education in England. The film title 'The Good, The Bad and The Ugly', a spaghetti Western released in 1966, starring Clint Eastwood, is used as a way of organizing the findings, namely the positive aspects of being a PE (The Good), the challenges of being a PE (The Bad), and the unspoken tensions in relationships between PEs, employers and universities (The Ugly). We recognize that utilizing such terms is somewhat provocative, but we employ them as an organizational framework to convey the concerns. Whilst the sample size is relatively small, the findings, nonetheless, have implications not only for PEs within the UK, but placement availability more generally, as placement provision is a key mechanism of later recruitment, and there may be similar implications for PEs and future social work supply in other countries. We argue that the current system of practice education and assessment of social work students in England, and we would argue elsewhere, is fragile and relies heavily on goodwill and the positives outweighing the negatives.

This exploration is important for two key reasons. Firstly, whilst recruitment into the role appears robust, it remains an expense for employers in terms of university fees of around £1500 to train as PE, the associated time costs in undertaking the programme and being in the role itself emerges strongly in the existing research. Second, there is a lack of information about the overall number of PEs who are qualified in England, how many of them are working (or not), and in what roles (i.e. with students, NQSWs, trainee BIAs and AMHPs). We suspect similar concerns may be apparent in other jurisdictions due to overlapping commonalities (Gregory et al., 2025). There is an urgent need for PEs to be

positively recognized for the important but complex and demanding role they undertake in supporting and assessing the next generation of social workers, as well as supporting the development of specialized roles. The findings are timely and important as they contribute to wider national debates about practice education, and, as aforementioned, link very directly to the issues of recruitment and retention of social workers as highlighted earlier. The article now briefly explores the context of social work and social work education in the UK.

Social work education in England

The Care Standards Act (2000) brought about significant change to social work education across the UK (Finch, 2017). Four regional care councils were set up in each country of the UK to regulate social work and social work education. 'Social Work' became a protected title and the degree in social work, which replaced the former qualification (the Diploma in Social Work) was introduced in 2003 (2004 in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). Other key changes included placement days increasing from 130 to 200, reduced to 170 in 2013, with 30 days of skill training taking place within the university (Finch & Tedam, 2023), strengthening entry requirements (Finch et al., 2021), enhancing fitness to practise procedures (Finch & Corrie, 2024), and ensuring people with lived experience of social work were involved in all aspects of the programme. Placements were required to be in different settings, with the final placement requiring students to engage in statutory tasks and interventions. In Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, a competency-based system of assessment is in place to assess practice learning, while in England, a capability model is employed: the Professional Capability Framework (Finch et al., 2021).

Whilst there have been changes in name, i.e. practice supervisor, practice teacher, practice assessor, now Practice Educator in the English context (Finch, 2017), field educator elsewhere, the primary task of PEs has remained constant, namely, to assess students on placement, against the relevant assessment framework (Finch, 2017).

Literature review

As the study was commissioned, the aims of the research were preset ahead of the more substantial literature being undertaken utilizing traditional methods. A range of databases available at the university where the study was undertaken were used, such as PsycINFO, EBSCO and ProQuest Central. A range of terms were used, i.e. 'practice educator', 'challenges of being a practice educator', 'recruitment and retention of practice educators' and 'supporting practice educators'. Terms like 'field educator' and 'field education' were also used to ensure international literature would be identified. We chose not to put parameters around the dates of publications as some publications, whilst relatively old, will likely still have resonance, given that the fundamental role of the PE has not changed, despite many changes to social work education in England as well as other countries.

We subsequently identified three main themes to emerge within the literature, first, the motivations for being a practice educator and the reasons why some PEs remained in that role; second, the challenges of the role; and third, organizational enablers of practice

learning more generally. In the context of the research undertaken, it was useful to subsequently explore whether the issues identified in the literature, were specifically local concerns, or pertained to more general issues faced by social work PEs.

Motivations for, and the positives of being a PE

National and international studies identified various reasons why social workers choose to become PEs and, arguably, what may keep them in the role. For example, in the UK, Cook et al. (2023), in a literature review, identified several reasons why PEs undertook the role; these included supporting the next generation of social workers, acting as a 'gatekeeper' to the profession, a way to ensure continual professional development, career progression, and in some cases, to address their own poor experience of practice education. Similarly, in England, Tedam and Mano (2022) identified that motivations centered on giving back to the profession, professional and personal development, and acting as gatekeepers. The learning gained from working with a student on placement has been explored internationally, for example, Reardon (2012) writing from an American perspective, argues that the experience of working with a student can be 'energising' in that the student's enthusiasm can be beneficial to teams. Globerman and Bogo (2003), focusing on the Canadian context, highlighted the positive contributions that students made within the agency, as well as the PE's role in fostering the importance of learning within workplaces. Also, in the North American context Gibson and Iverson (2025), identified giving back to one's former university, helping to shape the future of the profession and opening up opportunities for further professional development, for example, becoming involved in teaching, or other aspects of the social work programme. Ketner et al. (2017) highlighted further benefits of being a field educator, namely the gatekeeping role identified in other countries, being a role model to students and being an advocate for maintaining high performance standards in social work.

Challenges of the role

The literature identified the challenges of the PE role and over 21 years ago, Bell and Webb (1992) identified a UK concern which resonates to this day, namely a lack of sufficient time allocated to the role, not least in attending the PE course, and the time to work effectively with the student. Other challenges identified in the literature include the emotional distress that can result when working with a struggling or failing student, resulting in some PEs and teams not wanting to work with a student again (Finch, 2017). This is also an international concern noted for example, by Luhanga et al. (2014). Bogo (2015) writing from a North American context also noted the 'crisis' of practice education, with challenges including shortages of placements and field educators and a lack of effective relationships between the academy and the field.

Further challenges identified include the following: PEs feeling isolated and unsupported by their own organization and the university (Schaub & Dalrymple, 2013) and managing the dynamics when working as an offsite PE (Waterhouse et al., 2011). The literature identified reasons why PEs chose not to continue with the role, such as moving into management roles (Doel & Shardlow, 2017), a lack of managerial or agency support to undertake the role (Finch, 2017), high workload demands (Parker, 2007) and a lack of

confidence in undertaking the role (Waterhouse et al., 2011). Cook et al. (2023) also highlighted concerns regarding inadequate remuneration in the English context. It is important to note that in England, the government provides funding for placements (with the exception of apprenticeship students) and some PEs subsequently receive payment for working with a student.

Gregory et al. (2025) indicated challenges connected to a lack of consideration around issues of identity, racism and discrimination, difficulties in navigating the practice education system and offers of piecemeal support. Whilst these research studies were undertaken in the English context, these challenges overlap with some of the most significant international challenges in practice education (Drolet et al., 2023; Vassos, 2019). The numerous challenges of the role, might be significant in understanding why PES chose not to continue, although research has to date, have not focused on this in a robust way.

Organisational enablers of practice learning

The literature on organizational enablers supporting PEs in their role or enhancing its attractiveness, despite limited evidence that these supports do actually contribute to retention, highlights university-provided support through resources such as handbooks, briefings and training sessions (Waterhouse et al. 2011). In line with similar findings in the current research, Waterhouse et al. (2011) also found that PEs valued support given to the role by senior managers and receiving workload relief, salary increments, in-house conferences and support groups. Waterhouse et al., (2011) make several useful recommendations which include; agency-based support for newly qualified PEs, for example, mentoring and buddying schemes, additional support for PEs when failing students, good relationships with university staff, engagement of line management and senior management in practice education, workload relief, increments or other incentives, career pathways and formal recognition of the value of the role. Hay et al. (2016) writing from a New Zealand perspective, identified the need for universities to support field educators with technological changes and for agencies to adjust workloads to account for the time demands of being a field educator. Cook et al. (2023) scoping review identified the following as enablers of practice learning, team and managerial support with shared practice education arrangements, more effective processes for placement matching, less complicated paperwork, post-placement feedback and involvement of PEs in other aspects of qualifying programmes, such as teaching and assessment. Pascoe (2025) identified further organizational enablers of field education, that of universities providing training, not least in countries were PE qualifications are not required or available.

Overall, the literature paints a similar picture in terms of the organizational support required for PEs to continue educating the next generations of social workers, suggesting that there remains an urgent need to develop strategies to around recruitment and retention.

Methodology

Mixed methods research is increasingly being used in social work research (Foote, 2025) and is widely recognized as a valuable approach (Chaumba, 2013). A mixed methods

approach was employed using an online questionnaire and qualitative, semi-structured interviews with PEs. The survey was used to provide us with an overview of the types of roles undertaken by PEs in one area of England, the numbers and types of social work students they had worked with and the range of HEI providers. This data was reported in the commissioned report. In this paper, we are reporting the findings from the semi-structured interviews only. The semi-structured interviews ($n = 19$) were carried out online, using Microsoft Teams. They were video-audio recorded and transcribed using the inbuilt transcription function of Microsoft Teams; transcripts were then hand-checked for accuracy.

The participants

Survey respondents were asked whether they wanted to participate in an interview, and to provide their contact details if interested. A total of 24 PEs identified themselves and were contacted and of those, a total of 19 practitioners were interviewed: 10 from one local authority, 7 from the other local authority, 1 independent PE and 1 PE from an NHS (UK's National Health System) trust. Of the 19 interviewees, 16 were female (84%) and 3 were male (16%), which generally aligns with the national picture in terms of the sex of registered social workers in England which in 2022 was 82% female and 17.3% male (SWE, 2022). The participants worked in a range of roles: nine were social workers and PEs, six were team managers and PEs, two were both PEs and deputy team managers, one was a current PE and had been a team manager previously and one was both a PE and held another role. Eighteen of them were currently involved in Practice Education, and one person was not working as a PE at their current place of employment. Participants were not asked specifically about the setting they were currently in, but from the general comments provided, the PEs worked in the full range of statutory social work settings.

Data analysis

The semi-structured interviews were analyzed using the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) which includes familiarization with the data, coding, developing and reviewing of themes and reporting the findings. Thematic analysis explored and identified patterns within the data and was beneficial in analyzing interview data to elicit nuanced understandings of participant responses. Themes were constructed from the grouping of codes. For example, there were several codes that connected with PEs enjoying being part of the progression of learning which later developed alongside other codes into the 'Good' theme.

Ethics

The project gained ethical approval through a University Ethics Committee. To ensure sound ethical conduct was maintained within the study, the project was underpinned by the UK Policy Framework for Health and Social Care Research (NHS Health Research Authority, 2017). The recognized ethical practices involved in undertaking research with human participants were strictly followed, i.e. confidentiality, anonymity, privacy, avoidance of harm, and ensuring participants gave informed consent (Campbell &

Groundwater-Smith, 2007). Pseudonyms have been used for the interview participants and significant care was taken not to inadvertently identify participants, so in some cases, particular roles, the precise setting the PE works within, or team names have been redacted. The organizations have also not been explicitly identified; however, it is recognized that it might still be possible to identify them because of the authors' institutional affiliations. Additional safeguards were also put in place, namely, if participants were at risk of harm to themselves, or others, or further safeguarding issues were disclosed, then the participants' managers would have been informed.

Findings

The findings have been grouped into three main themes, the Good, the Bad and the Ugly. It is acknowledged that whilst 'the Good' may be easy to identify and more widely agreed upon, the so-called differences between 'the Bad' and 'the Ugly' need further consideration. We, therefore, grouped the themes relating to the challenges of being a PE within the 'Bad' category, recognizing that for many, 'the Good' significantly outweighed 'the Bad', and challenges were not all necessarily experienced as 'Bad' for all participants. The 'Ugly', however, included more concerning evidence of poor relations between PEs, local authorities and universities, as well as revealing the fragility of the current system, which, we argue, relies heavily on goodwill.

The Good

Love of learning and keeping up to date

For some participants, becoming a PE and staying in the role was because they enjoyed learning and it supported current and 'up to date' practice. Laura, for example, commented:

> . . .I love learning, it keeps me on my toes. . .if you don't stay on top of your learning, you will soon be in a situation where you don't know the answer.

Simon expressed a similar view that being a PE required one to continue to relate practice to theory and think about other theories rather than the ones *'you like to use and are comfortable with'*. He stated further that it *'invigorates the brain cells to go back to the theories'* and that it is *'a good grounding and refresher.'*

Some PEs also discussed the wider benefit to the team in having students, as it required the whole team to keep up to date. As Susan commented: *'I think for me and the team, it keeps things fresh'*. Other PEs also spoke about how having 'fresh' students counteracted team complacency and cynicism. Claire, for example, commented that working alongside a student:

> . . .makes you go back to when you were a student, and how different you were, and having somebody that is completely fresh faced and still excited, and not jaded or exhausted by the Council and the pressures we are all under. . ..it stops things getting stagnant!.

PEs also identified the reciprocal nature of the role, where both parties developed knowledge and insights. Sandra, for example, commented:

> I think I have got a lot of experience to share, but having said that, every student I had, I learned something from them. . .because new ideas are coming through all the time.

Enjoyment of seeing students develop

PEs commented on the satisfaction and enjoyment in seeing students grow and develop over the course of a placement. They spoke movingly about students having 'light bulb' moments. Simon, for example, commented:

> . . .I enjoy the bit where they [student] get it and you can see that they've got it and I enjoy the bit where they go, but why?

Similarly, Sandra commented about the excitement that comes when a student grasps an aspect of learning:

> . . .I get a real buzz from that. . . that moment when they [student social workers] suddenly get it. . .that spark and you can see it happening. . .they understand what they're doing, they understand the theory to practice. . .and I really get a buzz!

Christine also mentioned about the positives of seeing students grow in confidence throughout the placement and feeling a sense of fulfillment. She stated:

> . . .when you see somebody at the start of their placement who is unsure about their abilities, and they lack confidence. Then when you get to the end of the placement, they are competent practitioners who are confident in their own abilities . . . seeing that transformation is incredibly rewarding.

Gatekeeper to the profession

PEs positively perceived their roles as gatekeepers to the profession, particularly in maintaining standards. Consequently, they valued their involvement in recruiting former students into newly qualified roles within their own organizations and overall maintaining the quality of the future workforce. For example, Lucy commented:

> I am quite passionate about social work and about having good social workers. So, I wanted to be involved in educating the future social worker.

These aspects and good standards were particularly important for PEs working within NHS settings and experiencing the firsthand realities of working within the field. For example, Elaine, aimed to give students an experience of working within a mental health trust:

> I want students to get an experience of working in mental health. . .and hopefully we might recruit some of them after they've finished.

Impact on people with lived experience

Although PEs were not explicitly asked about the impact of student social workers on service users, some nonetheless highlighted this aspect. Oliver, for example, commented that because of students' protected caseloads, students could undertake more in-depth work with people. This benefited the individual, the PE and the team. Oliver stated:

> I've seen some students do some really quite advanced work in helping people make some really significant changes because of the dedication of the time. [given]

Ruth also raised this positive aspect and further pointed out that students bring the latest research knowledge to the team, which is beneficial to all service users, as well as team members. She stated:

> I love my students having time to be students. I don't expect them to be another member of staff. I like them to go off and do bits or can add a new added layer to maybe a piece of work, like an assessment. . .and then feeding it back to the team.

Wider benefits of being a PE

Other 'Goods' identified included PE skills being transferable and applicable elsewhere in the organization, for example, supporting and inducting new workers, and improving their supervision practice with their own staff and assessment skills more generally.

For some team managers working as offsite PEs, or PEs in non-facing service user roles, it gave them opportunities to remain close to front-line practice, and experience different settings. Sarah, for example, commented that having a student was *'really helpful because it keeps me closer to family-facing practice'*.

Other 'goods'

Other 'goods' emerged from the interviews. Participants all spoke favorably about the support they received from Practice Education Leads (PELS) based in local authorities, using them as a sounding board when issues arose, alongside the value of a having access to a TEAMS group, so questions and queries could be answered promptly by PELS, or other colleagues. Laura, for example, commented:

> . . . I can just pick up the phone and just call one of the leads, and just talk to them and even like lately, I've had moments where don't' think I can do this anymore. Because I am really struggling with my student and they have reminded me over and over, that no, you can do this. . .

The monthly PE support groups, often centered around a theme, i.e. writing reports, or working with struggling students which were led by PELs, were also noted as positive. As Laura commented:

> In [name of local authority] we have the workshops . . . they're really good, really good. We recently had some books as well. We all got some book which is helping me right now with my current student.

The annual PE conference, held at one of the universities, was also commented upon favorably by participants as William commented:

> it's really good that the [name of university] puts on a festival of practice learning, that's really good . . . and the opportunity to meet other practice educators, even those outside of [name of local authority] so like [another local authority] and [another local authority] practice educators will be there as well, so that's great.

Lastly, good relationships with universities and staff were also commented upon, particularly when PEs and university staff had developed long-standing and good working

relationships. For example, Susan commented on how important it was to have a good relationship with the university. She stated.

> I think the relationship between the PE and the uni is really important. . .and with . . . [name of university] I have a stronger relationship, they are more local and they get involved . . . just being able to have that conversation, without alarm bells ringing . . . a formal meeting is not always needed, .can we just pick up the phone and see how we do this.

Similarly, Simon commented:

> So, when you've been around and you know these people are linked to the university . . . so we have a direct link [to the university], it's certainly more helpful. It's been a big help. Just if there are any issues or uncertainties or questions or queries, we have.

The Bad

Working with struggling or failing students

All the PEs identified the negatives surrounding the emotionally charged experiences of supporting 'struggling' students and in a minority of cases, having failed a student. For example, Laura stated:

> . . .this is heartbreaking for me because she's the first student that I've had that's going to fail . . . I would have loved her to pass and feel. . .. Ohh it's a really good placement.

William, who was supporting a PE in a meeting to discuss their concerns about a student, commented on the feelings it can stir up, when difficulties arise:

> . . .. it's a really emotive space [the concerns meeting] because you're talking about some-body. . .how it reflects on the university's pass rates, there's somebody's career, there's emotions, there are all sorts of things, so it can be a difficult meeting to be in.

The broader impact on the wider team of having a struggling or failing student was also emphasized by Lucy:

> And it can also impact teams . . . I had to build up the trust again in our team in terms of having students. We had a run of two really poor students, and the team were very mistrustful of us having another student back because they were let down and had to unpick things those students had done with families.

Time

Workload pressures and the associated lack of time to do an effective job were raised by all participants in this study. As Ruth stated very explicitly:

> The biggest problem we have at the moment. . .is our time. We are so short staffed . . .we are on our knees. . .there is a relentless strain on you and your members of staff.

Sophie also commented on how the time commitment required to support a student often went unrecognized:

> I think there needs to be something done to recognise the amount of time that it takes to get a student through their placement. . .and that is just not about the time it takes to write the report . . .you need to be available 24/7.

Paperwork

A theme consistent across all PEs was the challenge of complicated paperwork, which was mentioned alongside the difficulty of variations in paperwork between universities. Laura, for example, commented:

> …and then the differences in paperwork with the uni's, each uni's' got different paperwork and some unis require more, some unis require less in terms of the report or in terms of the work the student has to do, like all the observations, but some require more observations, some require less, or the critical reflections, all those things.

Nonetheless, some PEs recognized the need to ensure assessments of students were robust and evidence based. Liz, for example, commented:

> … the reports can be quite time consuming, they are lengthy reports…but then, you know, you are assessing a student and their ability and we are the gatekeepers…ensuring that people are safe to practice and so we need a robust report.

Remuneration

The subject of insufficient remuneration was raised by all participants and was often linked with the issue of how much time was required to work effectively with a student. Participants expressed frustration at how the payment rates had not increased over several years, and that the payment did not reflect the amount of time that a student placement required. Emma, for example, commented:

> …making sure the payment is showing they [PEs] are valued because quite often, like I said, the work we put in any evening whatever … by the time you are taxed on that, you think, God, was it worth it?

Further, if a student was struggling or there were other challenges, then the time requirements would go up significantly. Some PEs felt that the payment was not the primary motivation for undertaking the PE role, although the additional payment was nonetheless welcomed. Chloe, for example, commented:

> I don't think you do it for the financial benefit because there genuinely isn't a financial benefit to doing it. What you actually get at the end is not a huge amount, not when you consider how much work you put into it.

The Ugly

Not being valued

The feelings of not being valued were partly linked to the issue of limited time and managers' lack of recognition of the time demands of the role and the complexity of the role. Sophie, for example, commented:

> I don't think practice education is given the recognition that it deserves…education has always been seen as the soft option, the easy option…you know…it's only supervision… you're just supervising the student.

Another aspect of feeling undervalued was the managers' and organizations' perception that taking on the PE role was purely a personal choice, given that it was a voluntary responsibility in addition to their day-to-day job. For example, Elaine commented:

> It's almost like they [managers] are doing me a favour by having a student because I want to have students, not just for the glory of myself or my career development.

Simon felt that the complex work of being a PE was simply not recognized. He stated that PEs should be:

> recognised more broadly, not just from one person saying to another person, but there being ways of broadcasting and championing and celebrating it. . .and if you are the one not necessarily winning an award, but that you can see from the organisation that you work for, that values the role.

Relationships with universities

Whilst not all participants were critical of universities, some expressed concerns regarding the caliber of students, universities feeling 'distant' and the complicated paperwork which varied between providers. Some participants were critical of students and felt they were unprepared for placements. The challenges of unprepared students and the perceived disconnect between universities and practice were also raised regarding struggling or failing students, where it appeared that relationships between Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and practitioners had become strained.

Discussion

Many of these findings align with previous research, including studies conducted several years ago, such as Waterhouse et al. (2011), as well as more recent contemporary research, such as Cook et al. (2023) and Gregory et al. (2025). The findings also align with international research, for example, Bogo (2015) and O'Donoghue (2024). The challenges thus identified in this research, time pressures, feeling undervalued, poor remuneration and the emotional experience of working with struggling or failing students are long-standing and consistent themes to emerge from the literature. These consistencies of concerns reinforce the validity of the findings and reflect engrained, broader challenges within the field, which can be framed as practice education stagnation. This research reflects how the perpetual recurrence of unresolved issues and lack of progress remains a fundamental concern for the profession at large and yet for the most part remains unaddressed. Indeed, these long-standing concerns are not just UK focused but issues within social work education internationally.

The research findings also accord with existing literature in terms of the 'goods', the motivations to undertake the role and the perceived positives of undertaking the role, namely; keeping up to date with knowledge and theories, gatekeeping the profession and enhancing transferable skills that can be employed elsewhere within their organization, as well as the opportunity to develop their supervision skills more generally. Other 'Goods' identified included the positive impact that students have on social work teams, in terms of new knowledge, being able to do more in depth work with service users and being enthusiastic. Through having students on placements, social work

organizations also benefit in terms of future recruitment. Certainly, the positive aspects identified in the findings ('The Good') are more numerous and may counterbalance and counteract the challenges and negative aspects ('The Bad' and 'The Ugly'). However, this starkly highlights the fragility of the system, particularly in the context of contemporary factors such as the ongoing fiscal pressures on public services more generally. As such, the system appears reliant on a potentially limited pool of highly motivated and dedicated PEs, who, at present, use 'The Good' to outweigh 'The Bad' and 'The Ugly'.

This system is therefore considerably fragile and relies on goodwill, which will not resolve the long-standing challenges identified here and in existing research. Given the current context, in which PEs have been continuously facing prolonged hardship, shrinking budgets and austerity, goodwill is not a sustainable long-term solution to ensure they continue in a complex role—and, indeed, a role that comes with its own distinct set of challenges, and, as this research and the existing literature show only too starkly, a role which risks becoming a burden rather than a positive and rewarding part of the social work job.

The goods therefore fall into two distinct arenas, the intrinsic and extrinsic goods, and what this research identifies is that the system is made fragile by relying on intrinsic, individual motivations, when the focus for development should be on organizational enablers, i.e. the extrinsic goods. Thus, what emerged strongly in this research that has not been apparent in existing research was the very valuable role played by PELs in supporting PEs which is a very tangible way an organization can demonstrate its commitment and value of PES.

Practical remedies, such as increased remuneration (the daily placement fee has remained unchanged since 2003), are, however, not very likely in the continuing climate of austerity, and in many other countries, payment is not available. There is a need therefore for both agencies and universities to consider ways in which they demonstrate their appreciation of PEs which may go some way to help or reinvigorate or re-energize practitioners' commitment to the role. Some 'Goods' and positive aspects identified in this research that support continuing in the role included the following: attendance at an annual regional PE conference, monthly PE support hubs, support given by practice education leads, and good relationships with HEI tutors.

Implications for practice

The implications for social work appear stark. If 'The Good' cannot outweigh 'The Bad' and 'The Ugly', the number of confident and experienced PEs will continue to decline, which may lead to a lack of placements and potentially have consequences on the number of social work students HEIs can recruit. Under-recruitment of students would, in turn, exacerbate continued workforce shortages, which would then impact PEs' abilities and opportunities to undertake the role.

We are struck by the consistent messages in the existing research about what might support PEs, namely: increased remuneration (although this is not a golden panacea as it comes with caveats, as noted in this research) organizations valuing the PE role, better relationships with HEI staff, and streamlined and consistent paperwork across universities. While attempts have been made in some geographical locations in England to harmonize the paperwork, we suspect this is not

the complete solution to concerns about retention—certainly, the lack of time, identified by participants in this and other research, feels like an impossible challenge to resolve. In terms of feeling undervalued by senior managers, some simple steps may help, not least thanking PEs when a student has completed their placement, explicit recognition of the complex and challenging task of practice education, i.e. not just a hobby, and viewing the PE role on par with AMHPs and BIAs.

In terms of individual PES, keeping the goods in mind may be a worthwhile strategy to balance out or reduce the negative impacts of the bad and the ugly. The importance of PEs, organizations and universities reinforcing a common shared goal, namely, the importance for students to have supportive but stretching placements that will adequately prepare them for the demands of qualified practice, is key, although we may differ in our views of what that means in reality. Acknowledging the challenging emotional impact of working with a struggling or failing student by all parties is also key. The research highlighted the supportive and enabling role played by practice education leads, alongside easily accessible support systems. It would thus be useful to share good practice both nationally and internationally to look at specific projects that have focused on retention of PEs.

Limitations

It is acknowledged that this study has several limitations. The research was carried out in one geographical region of the UK, meaning that regional differences may limit the applicability of the results to other parts of the UK. The findings, however, accorded with the existing research suggesting that regional variations have a limited impact. The qualitative nature of the study means that findings are based on subjective interpretations of participants' experiences although steps were taken to enhance the validity of the findings. The study nonetheless contributes new knowledge in terms of the fragility of the current system and the enablers that do make a difference and are potential way forward.

Conclusion

The positive, negative and challenging experiences of social work PEs in three organizations in one geographical location in England were identified. The findings are structured around three overarching themes: The Good, The Bad and The Ugly. The research thus chimes with the existing research, not least the reasons for PEs to continue in the role and the 'goods that come with the role, alongside the bad and the uglier aspects of the role. 'The Ugly' identifies more significant concerns, however, not least the impact of poor relationships and tensions between PEs and universities and feeling undervalued in the PE role by organizations and universities. The research concludes that the system is inherently fragile, relying on PEs' hope, goodwill and dedication. This is, in part, fueled by the hope that the positive aspects (The Good), driven by intrinsic personal motivations, do not become overwhelmed by the negative and challenging factors (The Bad and The Ugly).

Notes

1. AMHPs are responsible for organising, coordinating and contributing to Mental Health Act assessments.
2. A Best Interests Assessor is a professional, often with a background in social work, who assesses and determines the best interests of individuals lacking the mental capacity to make specific decisions.

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