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Statutory Placement Experiences of Final Year Students on a BSc (Hons) Social Work Programme in England

Emma Perry and Samantha Hughes, University of Gloucestershire

Emma Perry: eperry@glos.ac.uk ORCID: 0000-0002-7973-5055

Samantha Hughes: ORCID: 0000-0002-7715-9808

Abstract

Local authority social work departments in England have been facing challenges from a number of different areas for several years. The onset of austerity in 2008 resulted in funding reductions and constraints, many authorities have been deemed to be ‘inadequate’ or ‘in need of improvement’ by Ofsted, their inspectorate, and working conditions for practitioners have been found to be poor. It is against this backdrop that social work students on qualifying programmes undertake their final year statutory placement.

This research investigates the experiences of final year social work students on a BSc (Hons) Social Work programme in England. Focus groups and interviews were used to explore the experiences of 18 students placed within both Adults’ and Children’s Services in three local authorities. Data was analysed thematically and revealed commonalities and differences in experience. Differences between services were apparent with students from Children’s Services focusing upon local authority processes whilst Adults’ Services gave greater consideration to supervision and support. The areas of motivation and values, awareness of others, power and process also emerged as significant themes.

Key words: social work, student placements, statutory placements, field education, process

Introduction

In England it is a requirement of all social work qualifying programmes that students undertake 170 days of practice placement and 30 days of skills development activities (Social Work Reform Board, 2010). These should take place in at least two contrasting settings with two service user groups and provide experience of statutory social work tasks involving legal interventions (Department of Health, 2002). This latter requirement typically consists of a placement on a statutory social work team within a local authority. For many students, the practice placement is their first experience of statutory social work practice. It is widely recognised as a central part of social work education (Hemy et al, 2016) and provides the opportunity to ‘do’ social work. Yet little is known about students’ experiences of practice placements and how they find working in these environments (Litvack, Mishna & Bogo, 2012; Lam, Wong & Leung, 2007).

Local authorities are facing numerous challenges and threats from a number of areas (e.g. House of Commons, 2019; ADASS, 2018; The King’s Fund, 2018). Almost a fifth of local authority children’s services are rated as ‘inadequate’ and over 40% ‘need improvement’ (Ofsted, 2017). Within the sector there is an increased reliance on agency staff, almost 50% in some authorities (Perraudin, 2019), high staff turnover and vacancy rates between 6% and 26% (Department for Education, 2018).

When considering the workforce that students will be joining, there are significant issues. Social workers tend to be largely inexperienced, the majority of staff in Children’s Services have less than five years’ experience (DfE, 2018) and half of practitioners are looking to leave their job (Ravalier, 2018). Practitioners in both adults and children’s services are facing unprecedented pressures, largely due to successive cuts in public spending and ‘extremely poor’ working conditions (Ravalier, 2017). Heavy workloads, lack of managerial support, lack of reflective supervision and a ‘blame’ culture have been highlighted as key issues in driving this (Ravalier, 2018).

Existing research into students and placements has tended to focus upon specific aspects such as the relationship between knowledge and practice or issues in supervisory practice and learning outcomes (Lam et al., 2007) rather than their experience of entering and working within a local authority. Many findings identify the centrality of the practice educator relationship to students' satisfaction and perception of placement in addition to successful learning (e.g. Alperin, 1998; Parker, 2010). This relationship has been found to be both a risk and a protective factor, as those with a positive relationship with their practice educator generally managed challenges and setbacks well whilst a negative relationship had a significant impact on the student and became a source of emotional distress (Litvack et al., 2010).

Litvack et al. (2010) found that this relationship between practice educator and student was also significant when considering the environmental context of placement. Their research highlights that students were very aware of organisational and team issues and dynamics and the organisation's response to them, and, they were greatly affected by the environment they worked in. A positive relationship with their practice educator could protect from organisational stresses and difficulties whilst both a negative relationship and negative organisational environment significantly impacted the student's learning (Litvack et al., 2010). This demonstrates the importance of the practice educator in not just the students' satisfaction and learning but also their role in supporting the student to manage organisational demands and tensions.

Practice placements can be a source of anxiety (Gelman & Lloyd, 2008; Maidment & Crisp, 2011) and students on placement report a wide range of negative emotions including distress, frustration, self-doubt, disillusionment and disappointment (Litvack et al., 2010; Lam et al., 2007; Harr & Moore, 2011). This may be connected to a perceived gap between university teaching and the reality of contemporary social work practice and the former not being valued in the workplace (Higgins, Popple & Crichton, 2016). There may also be challenges in balancing the competing demands of placement and the roles and responsibilities in addition to being a student (Hemy et al., 2016).

Despite there being 'virtually no literature' on the impact of organisational context on social work students (Litvack et al., 2010, p238), there has been a growing recognition that social work students can experience ethical and moral challenges within practice settings which can result in moral distress or compassion fatigue (Lynch & Forde, 2017; Harr & Moore, 2011). Moral distress has been defined as 'when one knows the right thing to do, but institutional constraints make it nearly impossible to pursue the right course of action' (Jameton, 1984 cited in Mantrari-van der Kuip, 2016 p 87). Experiences of insufficient resources have been found to be clearly associated with experiences of moral distress (Mantrari-van der Kuip, 2016).

Recognition of the lack of existing research into student experiences of placement, acknowledgement of the challenges faced by local authorities along with a curiosity about how students found entering and working within these settings led to this research paper. The aim was to explore the experiences of final year students undertaking their final 100 day statutory placement. In keeping with the terminology used in the United Kingdom, the term 'practice educator' is used throughout this article. This refers to the practitioner who has responsibility for overseeing the learning and undertaking the assessment of the student whilst in the placement setting. The term 'placement supervisor' refers to a practitioner who oversees the students work whilst on placement. It is recognised that terms such as 'field educator' and 'field supervisor' may also be used.

Method

Eighteen individuals participated in this study. Sixteen were final year Social Work students on a BSc (Hons) programme. The other two participants had graduated from this programme within the past two years but had since decided not to pursue social work as a career. The majority of the individuals were female (N=16).

Three focus groups and two semi-structured interviews were undertaken. These methods were chosen in order to obtain rich data on participants' experiences and associated thoughts and emotions. The focus groups consisted of final year Social Work students (n=9, 2 and 5 respectively) and took place at two different timepoints during placement (groups 1 and 2 were between 65-70 days into placement and focus group 3, 10 days from the end of placement). The groups took place in the second half of placement in order to allow the participants to gain experience of their setting and were arranged to coincide with university recall days and service specific group supervision sessions in order to maximise attendance and include students in both children's and adults' services. All but one of the students in focus group 1 were placed within children and family services, students in focus group 2 within adolescence and young people's services and students in focus group 3 were placed within adults' services. The two interviews were conducted with the social work graduates. The graduates were included in the sample in order to gain an understanding of their experiences, explore why they chose not to become social workers and pragmatically, as they responded to the advertisement calling for participants (see recruitment details below).

All final year students enrolled on the social work programme were offered the opportunity to attend a focus group to discuss their experiences of placement. Students that wished to take part then contacted the lead researcher directly. The lead researcher was not involved in the assessment of students during or following placement and all students were informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any time without any consequences. Prior to the focus groups, ethical and procedural information was given to the participants and written and verbal consent obtained. Each of the focus groups lasted between 48 minutes and 1 hour 22 minutes and were recorded using a Dictaphone. Data was transcribed verbatim and anonymised. University and relevant local authority ethics committee approval was obtained prior to data collection.

With exception of the data collection technique and recruitment process, the two semi-structured interviews followed a similar procedure to the focus groups. These participants were recruited through the social work course social media page. Both interviewees had placements within Children's Services.

Materials and Analysis

An interview schedule consisting of questions based on previous social work literature and recommendations was devised. The data (i.e. the focus group and interview transcripts) was uploaded to NVivo 11. Data was analysed using the iterative process of inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and included the following phases: 1. Familiarisation with the data including brief notes capturing preliminary ideas. 2. Generation of codes of interest through extracting and

collating pertinent excerpts. 3. Organising emerging codes into broad themes, reflecting content and meaning of the data. 4. Reviewing and refining themes and 5. Labelling and defining themes.

Thematic analysis was undertaken for each of the focus groups and the interviews independently. Subsequently a comparison between the five clusters of data was conducted. The two authors coded the data individually before collaborating their findings to verify and refine the final themes.

Results

Four key themes that related to the research aims emerged from the focus groups and interviews, these were: 1) motivation to become a social worker and values, 2) awareness of others, 3) sense of power/potential for change and 4) perception of process. These four themes represented equal significance in the participants narratives. It was also evident that there were changes in how these areas were perceived and discussed as the placement period progressed. These will be explored under the heading of 'changed over time'. Thus, the findings are presented systematically to depict how the participants experiences materialised as the course transpired. Prior to this, consideration will be given to the commonalities and significant differences in overall experience. Differences related to the context of placement; at the time of the focus groups, one of the local authority's Children's services was in the aftermath of an 'inadequate' Ofsted inspection and was going through a restructure. Ofsted, the government's regulator for children's services, grades local authorities on the quality of services provided, 'inadequate' being the lowest grading. Local authorities with this grading risk government intervention, are required to demonstrate improvements and come under additional scrutiny. This impacted upon findings, there was a preoccupation with this for students in this sector whereas Adults' Services students gave more emphasis to the support and supervision that they had received. However, due to the small number of participants, it must be noted that these outcomes are not generalisable.

Overall Experience

The majority of students (15 out of 18) felt that their placement had been a positive experience with only a small number feeling that it had been negative or not enjoyable. All participants, even those who had chosen not to enter the profession, were able to identify positive aspects of their statutory placement experience. These were the opportunity to undertake direct work with service users, the variety of learning opportunities, the service user group and, for the majority of students, support that they had received. This latter area did, however, reveal significant individual differences, with some citing negative experiences of support from their Practice Educator and Supervisor but feeling that they had been supported by the wider team. A small number felt unsupported with one describing her experience as 'lonely' and another her team as unwelcoming:

Respondent 9 FG1: People didn't even bother to learn my name to start with, [I was] just 'the student'

All students, even those who had a negative placement experience, felt that they had gained something from their placement, this typically took the form of a personal journey and self-discovery:

Interviewee 1: ... the final placement, it wasn't all bad it was just highly challenging but I had a lot of personal growth and reflection...

Discussions revealed that students felt their statutory placements had been challenging, exciting and eye-opening with some not knowing what to expect prior to starting. It was felt that there was a gap in knowledge, both when starting the placement in terms of knowing the organisations polices and systems and between what is taught at university and the reality of practice.

Negative aspects of placement were often related to the work environment, hot desking emerged as an issue and source of anxiety whilst some students revealed that they had been put in the corridor or on a snack table due to no other desks being available. This they found personally difficult and felt that it had impacted upon their learning due to not being exposed to informal team discussions.

A further challenge that emerged was feeling pressure to pass and managing the joint demands of the placement and academic work. Students were very aware of the requirements of their assessed portfolio but had entered environments where organisational tasks and timescales took priority. Participants, particularly within Children's Services, reported not having time to reflect and not 'feeling like a student' with difficulties switching between placement and 'a student mindset' when they were required to begin their academic work in the evening after a day in the office.

In addition to feeling under pressure themselves, students were also acutely aware of the workload pressures upon others. Local authority teams were portrayed as busy, pressured and stressful work environments and most participants were aware of team members who were or had taken time off sick due to stress. Although the majority of students spoke positively about the support that they had received, it became apparent that this awareness of others impacted upon this aspect of the student experience. They would often not ask for support when needed due to not wanting to be a burden or place additional demands on already busy Practice Educators and supervisors.

Context Specific

The current restructuring that was taking place in Children's Services resulted in this and its consequences featuring heavily in discussions in the focus groups in this sector. Participants were very aware of what was happening in their work environment, this was not just limited to workload pressures but covered a variety of issues:

FG1 Respondent 9: There's a high staff turnover, there's no stability in the team, the caseloads are really high, my supervisor I feel sometimes doesn't have enough time for me because of her high caseload and ... support from management isn't there.

FG 1 Respondent 9: ... they removed all ... [Assistant] Team Managers and ours got removed overnight with nothing put in place so we ended up with one manager...across two teams...and we were like that for two months.

These changes resulted in an atmosphere of uncertainty for students, yet there also appeared to be a general sense of resignation and acceptance that this is what happens in practice. This led some to question how this would impact on their development, practice and the support they would receive as an NQSW.

Alongside this, the interrelated issue of performance and Ofsted ran strongly through these groups, along with a focus on process. Within teams, and the sector as a whole, there was a strong emphasis on meeting targets and timescales. This appeared to be being managed by teams/managers and experienced by students in two different ways. For some regular performance monitoring meetings

were felt to be scrutiny where staff were ‘named and shamed’ where for others this was seen as a supportive whole-team event where explanations and advice could be shared.

Differences in experiences of supervision were also evident with this featuring heavily in the discussions of the student’s placed in Adults’ services. Students felt that the supervisory relationship was more helpful and successful when their Practice Educator or Supervisor tailored the experience to their level of knowledge and learning style:

FG3 Respondent 4: *...when we first started I felt like sometimes I was always put on the spot...if you put me on the spot...the answer is not going to come. ... so we had to go through the whole process of what works for you... after that it just went, it was brilliant.*

FG3 Respondent 3: *I find academic stuff quite difficult and she’s really adapted to how I learn... which I found really good and it’s really helped me with theories*

Those who had had a less positive experience revealed feeling under pressure and ‘intimidated’ to meet the high standards of their Educator, know certain things or have tasks arranged and completed by certain points. Some felt their Educator had been inflexible and overly focused upon completing tasks which had impacted upon the learning relationship. One participant advised that although their supervision was ‘high quality’, an over rigid and task focused approach resulted in a dissatisfying experience:

FG3 Respondent 1: *...she is always looking at her watch, like I need to get here, I need to do that...I felt like I was on the caseload and supervision or this week’s visit is ticked off.... We don’t need to be boxed in, that’s not supervision.*

Developed over time

1. Motivation to become a social worker and values.

Discussions with students in Children’s Services were dominated by process, restructuring and performance. With these students on front-line teams, aside from direct work (discussed in very general terms), there was little mention of what was being gained from placement, the specific aspects they were enjoying or their value base. No case examples were raised or explored and there was no evidence of any ‘fire in the belly’ for the profession.

Motivation and values become more evident as the placements and focus groups progressed, the final focus group clearly demonstrated their motivation for becoming social workers and spoke in terms of specific values in their practice:

FG 3 Respondent 1: *I just felt in this case particularly, I have been able to hold on to the values of autonomy, of human rights, the right to make unwise decisions and virtually back him [service user] up where he felt... that people were pressuring him into a decision.*

The strongest narratives in this area were from the interviewees. They spoke passionately about their value base and this was what had brought them onto the course. Their final placement experience had however resulted in them realising that, in the current climate, they were unable to practice in accordance with their values and, for them, this was a central reason why they chose not to enter the profession:

Interviewee 1: And, actually it made me think do I even want to be called a social worker?

Interviewee 2: The reasons why I wanted to go into social work in the first place, for me, for the children who needed the most help and I felt the greatest need to support...It just wasn't happening.

All groups recognised that at times they were unable to work in accordance with their values. The final focus group offered some deeper explorations, appeared to be grappling with the tensions in this area and gave examples where values had been compromised.

2. Awareness of others.

All participants were very aware of what was happening around them and the workloads and pressures upon others. There was frequent mention of staff members being 'stressed' or 'burnt out' and taking sick leave. However, there were significant differences in how these people were perceived by the participants. For the early focus groups, there was almost a sense of inevitability that the participants would become these individuals:

FG 2 Respondent 2 ...before we fall into that role of the mundane sat at my desk, I haven't got time for that, I've just gotta write a report, I've gotta write an assessment, I've gotta fill this form in

FG 2 Respondent 2 ...I think whilst we're on placement we do it [practice in the way we aspire to] ...and then through ASYE we're doing it... and then somehow this massive change happens where it's just not attainable anymore. I don't really know why but that's what I see in the younger social workers

For the final focus group, pressure upon others was recognised and acknowledged but not connected with themselves or their future.

3. Sense of power/potential for change

All groups were very aware that being a student put them in a relatively powerless position in relation to challenging and speaking up when they were unhappy. They were acutely aware of wanting to pass the placement and their reliance upon the Practice Educator. A second area where the issue of power became apparent was the sense of how much individuals could influence and bring about change, both with service users and within the system in which they were working.

Participants within Children's Services appeared to have little sense of being able to bring about change. Discussions presented their role as following process, demonstrating eligibility and meeting the needs of the organisation. For the focus group this, again, was occasionally reflected upon, but largely uncritically accepted. When considering the interviewees, powerlessness was a dominant theme, however, this was recognised, reflected upon and a central reason why they had decided not to enter the profession:

Interviewee 2 – it sort of came to be apparent that I couldn't make that big an impact. I mean, I could for some children, but the majority...just weren't meeting the criteria...it was just frustrating

Interviewee 1 – You go into this organisation and there is a culture and it becomes normality and you get sucked into that... so you as a person, you get bowed down by the constraints that you feel are there.

A different stance was evident in the Adults' Services focus group, there was a sense that they were able to bring about change through their practice and they were able to improve the lives of service users:

FG3 R3 You will go into cases and they've had a bad experience...then by the end they are saying thank you, you've been a real help and I just actually feel like I have made a difference

4. Perceptions of process.

As the students progressed through placements, there was change in how they perceived and discussed process. From the uncritical acceptance and very early questioning at the beginning there became a recognition of how process could be used to the service user's advantage. There was also a more critical approach with participants questioning the amount of processes, the level of scrutiny and looking at the consequences of this for service users:

FG3 R4 ...anything that has got a budget attached to it has to be approved by all these people yet we're okay to go out and do a capacity assessment and potentially take away somebody's rights away and that doesn't need any sort of approval

Processes therefore changed from being seen on an individual basis and something that had to be 'learnt' and followed to something that was being grappled with. They could be helpful but were also a constraint, limitation and a cause of value conflicts. By the 'post placement' period, the interviewees were viewing process as part of a much wider system which was ultimately not working as it should be:

Interviewee 1: actually, it's management, pillar to post. No you don't meet our thresholds and although you are begging out for help we are going to push you back to this person... It just was a mess

Discussion

It is reassuring that the majority of students found their placement a positive experience despite exploring many negative aspects of working in a statutory setting. Positive aspects were being able to undertake direct work with service users, the range of available opportunities and the support that many had received. The placement provided the opportunity to 'do' social work and this was valued and embraced. These positive aspects were however overshadowed with much more attention given to negative aspects. The negative aspects which generated the most discussions were related to organisational issues such as navigating processes, the limiting effects of policies and procedures, workloads and the emphasis upon performance. The practice placement made students very aware of the difficult and challenging environment in which statutory social work operates.

Those students who did not have a positive experience or would not be entering the profession were still able to identify some positive aspects. Enhanced self-awareness is often recognised as an outcome of social work education (e.g. Lam et al., 2007). From the focus groups and interviews,

significant differences were apparent with variations in quality and support levels given by practice educators and supervisors, attitudes and cultures of teams and working environments. This supports existing findings about the highly individual nature of student placements (e.g. Lam et al., 2007).

Within regard to the supervisory relationship, students highly valued Practice Educators who were approachable and helped enable their learning. The most positive examples given were those educators who took the time and effort to find out where the student was in their learning and recognised and worked with their individual style. They were less complimentary about educators who were focused upon task and inflexible in their approach.

The working environment and context undoubtedly impacted upon the student experience, this ranged from small aspects such as hotdesking to performance management and restructuring. Findings support the notion of students as 'very insightful observers' (Litvack et al., 2010) who are fully aware of events, pressures and the dynamics playing out around them. The organisational context impacted upon students' learning as awareness of others' workloads and pressures meant that they did not always seek help when needed due to not wanting to add to what was perceived as already heavy burdens.

The organisational context was also significant in forming expectations about future practice and a career in social work. It was notable that there was a recognition, largely uncritical acceptance and sense of inevitability of high workloads, levels of pressure, sickness and burnout. This was seen as the reality of contemporary social work practice and was never questioned or challenged by the focus group participants.

What was striking in the findings, particularly in relation to Children's Services, was the focus upon process. Although this can be partly attributed to changes following the Ofsted inspection and restructuring, it cannot be solely due to this as this topic featured significantly, in various aspects, in all focus groups and interviews. This preoccupation has been found by other researchers (Lam et al., 2007) and may be seen to reflect the fact that social work practice is centred around the completion of defined and increasingly narrow statutory tasks, timescales and meeting outcomes (Higgins & Goodyear, 2015; Higgins et al., 2016) and a lack of emphasis given to direct work with service users.

The issues of power and values also emerged as key for students. Students showed awareness of their powerlessness and dependency upon the practice educator to pass, supporting existing findings in this area (e.g. Parker, 2010), yet power was also significant in relation to the ability to bring about change and improve the lives of service users and their families. When considering this in relation to process, Children's Services students who were preoccupied with process had little sense of any power to bring about change and saw their role in terms of following processes and procedures. Whereas the Adults' Services group felt that although process needed to be followed it could still be used, and sometimes challenged and, as practitioners, they felt they could still achieve positive outcomes.

All focus groups recognised, that social work involves not always being able to practice in accordance with an individual's value base. Research (e.g. Jack & Donnelan, 2010) has found that newly qualified social workers experience conflict between their social work ideals and the reality of practice; these findings show that this is also apparent for students prior to qualification. For the interviewees, the emphasis upon process and the associated perceptions about lack of power resulted in value

conflicts that they found unacceptable; these participants undoubtedly experienced moral distress. For the adult services focus group, their less rigid and accepting perception of process gave them a greater sense of being able to bring about change and resulted in a sense of being able to practice in a value-based way. Where conflicts were apparent, they appeared to be mitigated by maintaining a sense that they could still achieve something positive. They may be seen to be experiencing ‘compassion satisfaction’ as they gained satisfaction from helping others along with a feeling that they were able to make a difference.

Placement is a time when students explore how the personal and professional aspects of self come together (Litvack et al., 2010) and experience influences the growing professional self (Lam et al., 2007). This involves a process of negotiation and redefinition due to the complexities, limitations and reality of practice and others in the placement setting (Lam et al., 2007). It may be argued that this emergence of the professional self and negotiation and redefinition is evident within the participants’ discussions and can account for the changing perceptions and discussions on the four areas explored above.

Recommendations

Although generalisability is limited, key recommendations can still be drawn from this study. Students need support to negotiate the complexities, challenges and tensions that arise in practice. Universities should consider how they can raise awareness of and explore potential dilemmas and difficulties and encourage students to develop skills to manage these prior to placement. This could be part of skills based or preparation for practice learning.

Practice Educators and supervisors are in a central position to further this learning and support students through these difficulties. These situations need to be acknowledged and explored as they are an inevitable part of practice. Deconstructing them with students requires time and a skilled approach and it is important that this is recognised by placement settings. It is vital that Practice Educators and supervisors are learner centred and accommodate the student’s learning styles and levels of knowledge in the supervisory relationship. Clear messages need to be given to students that those who support them may be busy but are still available for help and support whilst the focus needs to be upon learning rather the completion of assessed tasks.

On a wider level, the student experience needs to be considered in relation to the dominant culture and approach of the placement organisation. A less rigid approach to process and performance and a greater emphasis upon allowing practitioners to work in a more value-based way is required. If social workers feel that they can make positive changes, whilst still meeting statutory requirements, this may result in a more positive experience for students. This, along with the difference this study has identified between Adults’ and Children’s Services and the reasons why students choose not to enter social work as a career are areas where further research is needed.

Students need to develop a more positive perception of contemporary practice and the social work task. Issues such as sickness levels, caseloads and organisational culture need to be examined and addressed by local authorities in order to create a more positive work environment. These findings show that the stressful environments and negative perceptions that students are exposed to can create a negative mindset and sense of inevitability in relation to high caseloads, procedural

approaches and becoming burnt out. It is important that this is addressed and students enter practice environments which are supportive of the development of a more positive professional self.

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