



**Social work students sharing practice learning experiences:
Critical reflection as process and method.**

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11 **Social work students sharing practice learning experiences: Critical**
12 **reflection as process and method.**
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14
15 **ABSTRACT**
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17 This paper offers a commentary regarding the centrality of critical reflection in social work
18 before discussing a research project drawing on a sample of ten social work students as they
19 approached the end of their social work training in one English university. The original intention
20 of the research was to focus solely on students' perceptions of critical reflection, but when
21 using a more reflexive approach, we identified that participants utilised the focus groups as an
22 opportunity to discuss their practice learning experiences *per se* before considering and
23 discussing critical reflection. Most students were placed in child protection social work teams
24 and discussed how they felt unprepared for such a fast-paced and stressful environment.
25 Participants felt that the expectations some practitioners had of students were unrealistic, and
26 not always commensurate with the Professional Capabilities Framework. Students highlighted
27 the use of practice scenarios in developing their knowledge and skills particularly when
28 considering their application of critical reflection. This study highlights the significance of
29 adequate preparation for practice and argues for a more focused agenda for future research
30 exploring the culture of learning, including those factors that inhibit students sharing their
31 concerns as well as the training needs of educators.
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44 **Key words**
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46 Social Work Education, Practice Placements, Critical Reflection, Practice Education,
47 Supervision, Social Work Students.
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Introduction

The ability to critically reflect on one's learning and practice is a key component of academic and practice-based education in social work in the United Kingdom (UK) at both qualifying and post-qualifying levels. Fook and Askeland (2007, p.522) suggest that critical reflection can be distinguished from the generalised capacity to reflect and think about one's actions as it incorporates "an understanding of personal experience within social, cultural and structural contexts." Critical reflection allows practitioners to develop learning from experiences and events that can then be used to strengthen professional practice. It is important to note that critical reflection is not a one-off event, rather it is a continual process of thinking back over what happened, deliberating on it and then learning lessons from that. Proficient practitioners continually learn, advance and expand their skills, allowing their practice to flourish. To this extent the researchers were interested in student perceptions of critical reflection both on placement and in University. Government and professional reports and literature (Higgins and Goodyer, 2015; Laming, 2009; Munro, 2011; Social Work Task Force, 2009, Social Work Reform Board, 2011) also underline the importance of critical reflection and analysis in order to enhance assessment and decision-making and ultimately protect vulnerable children and adults. Models of reflection allow a structured approach to critical reflection and it is important that practitioners find a model or framework to support their practice that they are comfortable with and one which will work well for them. For example, Kolb's (1984) four stage model focuses on gaining understanding through actual experiences:

- Concrete experience - an event occurs
- Reflective observation - what is new about this?
- Abstract conceptualization – what new ideas may be developed about this experience?
- Active experimentation – how might these ideas be applied to different situations?

Another four-stage model popular with social work students is the Weather Model (Maclean, 2016). The model uses the weather to consider the different elements of critically reflective social work practice. Practitioners are invited to reflect on an event by considering the following:

- Sunshine – what went well?
- Rain – What didn't go well?
- Lightening – what came as a shock or surprise?

- Fog – what didn't you understand?

Just as the choice of models to support critical reflection are many, the activity of critically reflecting on one's practice is a complex and unique process. Critical reflection is seen as a prerequisite to effective practice as well as being significant for career development and appraisal of social worker's skills, with the Knowledge and Skills Statements (KSS) for Social Workers in adult services (Department of Health, DoH, 2015) and the KSS for child and family social workers (Department for Education, DfE, 2015) both outlining what a qualified social worker in England should be able to do by the end of their assessed and supported year of practice (ASYE) which includes supervision, critical reflection and analysis. Laming (2009) and Munro (2011) made explicit reference to the context in which modern-day social work takes place in the UK and highlight the fact that practitioners work in situations of complexity and uncertainty, making reflective and analytical skills an essential component of daily practice.

In spite of explicit acknowledgement that social workers need to possess higher-level skills in respect of critical reflection and analysis in order to intervene and make decisions in situations of complexity and unpredictability, limited accompanying guidance has been provided relating to *how* to support practitioners in achieving this. This could be viewed as a positive approach, as a 'one size fits all' response could potentially inhibit the development of a creative and flexible strategy, although this also means that approaches may differ quite significantly and potentially lead to inconsistency and incoherence. As well as the complexity and individuality of being able to critically reflect on an experience there is an obvious power imbalance between students and their educators which is rarely acknowledged. Critical reflection can be an intricate process that differs between individuals in a web of complexity and the reflective skills of educators whether in practice or in the academy often appears to be taken for granted. In actuality given the individual nature of critical reflection it is challenging for educators to support the development of this for each student in a meaningful way.

UK Governmental reviews have previously sought to examine the effectiveness of social work education (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014 and Narey, 2014) and implied that training was not fit-for-purpose (Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee, 2015). The Education Select Committee then raised concerns suggesting that different agendas, coupled with the pace of change were effectively pulling social work in "two contrary directions" (McNicoll, 2016, p.2). The majority of social work students in England follow a 'generic' curriculum making possible future practice with either children or adults. By contrast, perceptions of differing agendas at the Department for Education (DfE) and the Department of Health (DoH) and the presence of a Chief Social Worker for Children **and** a Chief Social Worker for Adults, as

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3 opposed to one overall Chief Social Worker may be seen to be at odds with the underlying
4 ethos of pre-qualifying genericism within UK social work education.
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7 Although the UK government has made their views about social work education known,
8 student voices are seldom sought or heard. Evidence from a review of the literature suggests
9 there are gaps relating to pedagogical methods and strategies that may promote students'
10 confidence and capacity to engage in critical reflection (Higgins and Goodyer, 2014;
11 McCusker, 2013). This highlights the need for further studies to explore the effectiveness of
12 particular pedagogical approaches and strategies and provided the rationale for the study
13 under discussion. Social Work practitioners operate in an increasingly globalised context
14 (Morley, 2004) and by engaging with critical reflection as a pedagogical method, the
15 significance of reflection and critical analysis creates greater possibilities to recognise and
16 challenge structural inequalities, for as Twikirize (in Spiker and Twikirize 2014, p.146) states:
17 'Social work educators in collaboration with social welfare agencies have a public role and
18 obligation to produce professionally competent, critically aware, culturally sensitive social work
19 practitioners'. Insights into the relevance and practice value of critical reflection from students'
20 perspectives is seen as key in reducing the theory/practice divide (Gant, et al, 2019), whilst
21 exploring students' experiences of critical reflection offers the potential to identify and
22 understand the range of variables that may promote or inhibit reflective learning (Higgins and
23 Goodyer, 2014; Staempfli, Adshead and Fletcher, 2015).
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34 35 **Literature Review** 36

37 Beginning with literature published in 2003 (the point from when the main qualification route
38 into social work in the UK has been via university education) and going through to 2019 an in-
39 depth search of the literature was undertaken. The search terms were "teaching" AND "critical
40 reflection" AND "social work". Additional filters were used to ensure that only peer-reviewed
41 journal articles were identified. This search resulted in twenty-five results, some of which were
42 duplicated articles.
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48 After reading the full texts only ten of these were deemed relevant as several papers focused
49 on specific contexts or critical reflection with specific client /age groups and were therefore not
50 relevant for this project. In addition to the Boolean search, professional websites were also
51 consulted including the British Association of Social Workers, College of Social Work and
52 Higher Education Academy. The review also included reference to Fook, Freire, Mezirow
53 and Schön whose work was outside of the initial timeframe as they have produced seminal
54 pieces of work about critical reflection and transformative learning and Ixer's controversial
55 2000 paper. Several of the articles relating to critical reflection focus on trying to clarify or 'pin-
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3 down' a definition of what this means (D'Cruz et al, 2007; Fook, 2002; Fook, 2007; ; Fook and
4 Askeland, 2007; Theobald, Gardner and Long, 2017; Thompson and Pascal, 2012; Thompson
5 and Thompson, 2009). Ixer's article "There's no such thing as reflection" (2000), criticised the
6 scale in which reflective practice had become established in the social work discipline without
7 any agreed consensus of what it was or evidence-base to confirm its effectiveness. This has
8 since been noted more widely in the literature (Bay and Macfarlane, 2011; D'Cruz et al, 2007;
9 Fook 2007; Fook and Askeland, 2007; Theobald, Gardner and Long, 2017; Thompson and
10 Pascal, 2012) with an attempt by the aforementioned academics' to clarify the nature, purpose
11 and value of critical reflection within social work.

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18 Ixer revisited his controversial work in 2010 and concluded that in spite of considerable
19 discourse within the profession, very little social work research has been published that
20 provides evidence of its value. In Ixer's (2010) review of the critical reflection literature, he
21 highlights the influence of academic Jan Fook who has been one of the most prolific
22 contributors to this debate. Drawing on Fook's, (2002; 2007) and Fook and Askeland's (2007)
23 work, Ixer (2010, p.80) concurs that through the process of critical reflection, potential positive
24 outcomes can be achieved: particularly in relation to an increased understanding of theory,
25 self-awareness and ability to work with uncertainty. These potential outcomes emerged in all
26 of the articles and all authors referred to Fook's contributions to the body of literature on critical
27 reflection within their papers. The literature search was ongoing throughout the course of the
28 study.

36 **Methodology, Design and Methods**

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39 This research project utilised a qualitative, descriptive approach, relevant as this study was
40 concerned with attempts to understand student's subjective experiences of *learning about* and
41 *attempting to practise* critical reflection. The researchers adopted a broad-based interpretivist
42 paradigm believing knowledge and understanding should not be viewed as something 'out
43 there to be discovered but derived and created from the experiences of the social actors'
44 (McLaughlin, 2012, p.29).

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49 Research into the effectiveness of pedagogical enterprises is almost always undertaken by
50 and from the point of view of professionals (Clare, 2007). This study aimed to privilege the
51 views and experience of students, with a qualitative approach offering the potential to elicit
52 significantly deeper insights into their lived experiences and those aspects of teaching and
53 learning in relation to critical reflection which they found most effective.

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3 Focus groups were chosen as the most appropriate means of data-collection as they offered
4 the potential for learning more about how students (both shared and individually) obtain
5 knowledge and develop their understanding of critical reflection.
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9 Cyr (2016) suggests that focus groups offer the possibility of producing a significant amount
10 of data about a topic in a less time-consuming way than individual interviews. This method
11 offers the opportunity to promote interaction between participants and can also serve as a
12 helpful vehicle through which participants enable each other to explore and challenge their
13 views.
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17 The sample was purposive (Carey, 2013) as participants were identified based on experience
18 of the phenomenon under investigation. An important consideration was the participants' level
19 of insight into the study because as students they needed to be able to discuss their views
20 about the research topic in detail (Krueger and Casey, 2015).
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24 The selection criteria were post-graduate social work students at one English University who
25 had completed two practice placements and were in the final month of their programme. Out
26 of a potential 25 students 10 agreed to participate.
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30 In order to recruit the participants, an information poster was displayed at the participating
31 University. Voluntary participation was emphasised and caution was exercised in an attempt
32 to avoid students feeling a sense of pressure to participate. All the participants ($n=10$) who
33 initially requested information took part. Potential participants were all students on a
34 programme where the researchers were academic teaching staff. The researchers had not
35 taught this cohort or assessed any of their work. The timing of the project was planned to
36 ensure all student's academic work was submitted and marked by the point of the focus
37 groups, in order to minimise the risk that students felt obliged or coerced to participate.
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41 The group composition was reflective of the overall make-up of the cohort and the demography
42 of the local area in terms of age, gender and ethnicity. The participants' ages ranged from 20-
43 50 years. Two participants were male, nine described themselves as 'White' one as 'Black'.
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47 Ethical approval for the research project was obtained from the faculty ethics committee and
48 signed consent obtained from participants. All of the participants had experienced practice
49 placements in English Local Authority social work teams, six in child protection teams, one in
50 a fostering and adoption placement and three in adults' team placements.
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54 Given the number of participants a decision was taken by the researchers to hold two focus
55 groups of 5 participants with each group assigned a different area to discuss. This was
56 primarily on a practical basis to assist with transcription and to facilitate in-depth discussions
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3 around a specific topic. The first focus group explored students' experience of critical reflection
4 from a university-based teaching and learning perspective.
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7 This group were asked the following questions:
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9 Please discuss the role that teaching and guided reading within taught modules in university
10 played in your development of understanding of critical reflection.
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13 What if any, were the mitigating factors that influenced active engagement in the process of
14 learning about and using critical reflection in university?
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17 What factors have influenced the degree to which you have been able to incorporate critical
18 reflection in your university-based learning and assessments?
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21 Similar questions were posed to participants in the second focus group, with the word
22 'university' being replaced with 'practice placement'
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25 Students were allocated randomly to a group. Each focus group lasted approximately 75
26 minutes.
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28 29 **Analysis**

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32 Analysis of the focus groups was based on the entire data set. The audio recordings were
33 transcribed by hand by the researchers, believing, as Braun & Clark (2006, p.21) assert that
34 "Time spent in transcription is not wasted, as it informs the early stages of analysis and a far
35 more thorough understanding of the data is achieved".
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39 Following transcription codes were assigned across the data-set. This was achieved by
40 using different colours to highlight information within the transcript that was relevant to each
41 code and by making notes in the margin of the script. This took a significant amount of time
42 in order to avoid missing something important or moving to the next stage prematurely.
43
44 Being mindful of Braun & Clarke's (2006, p.21) cautionary warning that, refinement of codes
45 "could go on ad-infinity" the researchers ceased when it appeared that any refinements
46 were not adding anything substantial, believing that the potential themes had emerged and it
47 was possible to see, "how they fit together and the overall story they tell about the
48 data"(ibid).
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54 All codes were then examined in order to identify potential themes. In order to avoid
55 imposing inaccurate meaning to the data, Jowett & O'Toole's (2006) advice was followed in
56 investing time and effort to identify and understand the subjective meanings of the
57 participants as reflected in the transcripts: This provided important 'checks-and-balances' on
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3 the researcher's "analysis of accounts" (p.454).

4 Thematic analysis was considered appropriate as the main analytic frame of reference
5 because of its emphasis on abduction inference which '...provides a way to think about
6 research, methods, and theories that nurtures theory construction without locking it into
7 predefined conceptual boxes (Tavory and Timmermans 2014, p.4) thus allowing themes to
8 *emerge* from the data rather than imposing possible meanings on the respondents
9 (Denscombe, 2014), therefore mirroring the processes imbued within the notion of critical
10 reflection itself. Such in-depth focus on content enabled the exploration of commonalities and
11 differences within the data to reveal thematically-recurring issues.
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18 Initially nine potential themes were apparent:

- 19 1. Students not feeling prepared enough for placement;
- 20 2. More practice application of critical reflection needed in University teaching and
21 assessment;
- 22 3. Power imbalance between students on placement and their practice educators;
- 23 4. No recognition during placement of the student status;
- 24 5. Lack of support and guidance during placement;
- 25 6. Variation of practice educators;
- 26 7. Issues articulated regarding 'Surviving' the practice placement;
- 27 8. Barriers to and strategies that support critical reflection;
- 28 9. Students feeling that unrealistic expectations were placed on them by practice educators.
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47 Having identified themes, it was important to check if they worked in relation to the coded
48 extracts from the dataset. During this process, a search for negative case examples
49 enabled variations and contradictions to be analysed. This resulted in a refinement of what
50 had initially appeared to be potential themes. Some of these, for example students feeling
51 that unrealistic expectations were placed on them by practice educators, contained
52 insufficient evidence across the dataset to be a theme. This was not disregarded as it was a
53 strong feature of several accounts expressed by participants, however if was subsumed into
54 an overarching theme.
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3 Gringeri, Barusch & Cambron (2013) found only 16% of all qualitative SW research papers
4 published between 2008 and 2010 located themselves and the impact of self in their
5 research. The researchers were keen not to overlook this important aspect, particularly in
6 the process of data analysis and a series of measures were taken these included member-
7 checking, negative case analysis, use of supervision, reflexive journal and peer-debriefing
8 (Hays, Wood, Dahl & Kirk-Jenkins, 2016).
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13 As the process developed it became obvious that two areas could be described as
14 'overarching' covering the majority of points and appearing to be underpinned by and related
15 to challenges regarding how students' obtain knowledge and develop understanding of critical
16 reflection.
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- 20 • Theme 1. The challenge of not being prepared enough for practice placement;
21 (Subtheme 1, 2, 4 and 8)
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- 23 • Theme 2. 'Surviving' the practice placement; (Subtheme 3,5,6,7,9)
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26 Understanding how students obtained the knowledge needed in order to prepare for
27 placement and if/how they developed their understanding of critical reflection, ultimately
28 affects their ability to thrive on placement, and is key to enhancing understanding and
29 informing Practice Educators in the field as well as educators in the academy.
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33 **Identification, Discussion and Interpretation of Themes.**

34 **Theme 1: The challenge of not being prepared enough for practice placement.**

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38 The majority (5 out of 6) of participants who were on placement in child protection teams
39 reported having little or no time made available for their critical reflection and remarked how
40 additionally they received insufficient or no induction, and little support and guidance around
41 key functions of their role, experiencing too, a palpable sense of the power imbalance between
42 themselves and practice educators who oversee the work of students on placement. Virtually
43 all data obtained related to students articulating their thoughts regarding how University could
44 do more to address these concerns within University-based teaching and support students in
45 becoming more realistic about what lay ahead, as well as becoming more resilient
46 practitioners.
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53 All six participants who were on placement in child protection teams felt they had needed more
54 preparation for the realities of the role, as well as time allocated for critical reflection so that
55 the role would not be so much of a shock. One participant opened up the discussion with the
56 following statement:
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3 *I felt totally unprepared (for placement) and I do not think you can sum up (pause) just*
4 *how in-tense and you are not equipped for it... It is just a com-plete-ly different world*
5 *and it is like a house has fallen in on you.*
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9 For another participant:

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11 *the reality of SW is really quite shocking... It is a completely different world and you*
12 *are just not equipped for it. (see Laidlaw et al 2020 and 'Placement shock')*
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15 Another agreed:

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17 *You need to be able to explore the risk factors and protective factors and analyse all*
18 *of that in terms of - do the risk factors outweigh the protective factors?you have*
19 *the whole political stuff that is going on.....with Local Authority interpretation of*
20 *thresholds being very high.... That I feel would prepare students a lot more for the*
21 *reality when you get out on placement and set you up for success.*
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26 All participants felt there could have been more preparation but initially there was a difference
27 of opinion in respect of whose role this was.
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33 One noted:

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35 *I sort of found my placement (pause) basically the same as yours (named another*
36 *participant) but you're not going to know **how** to do it until you have actually done*
37 *it. There is no way of preparing you. There is no way of teaching you. Once you have*
38 *done it, you will know how to do it, but you won't know how to do it until you have done*
39 *it.*
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44 Such a perspective points towards the role of placement staff as well as University staff in
45 supporting students to make this adjustment.
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48 **Discussion of theme 1**

49 Being prepared for placement links to the work students need to do and the skills they need
50 to attain, in particular in relation to critical reflection and the experiences they have been
51 exposed to prior to their placement. Research into the impact of students having a voice in the
52 choice of assessment (O'Farrell, 2009 and Long, 2012) found that it increased student
53 engagement and attainment. All participants in the focus groups remembered an assessment
54 in a final year module that had involved critical application of knowledge, theory, law and ethics
55 to an actual case. This use of critically reflecting on a case study made a significant difference
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3 to how students engaged with the assessment, and they discussed their overall feelings of
4 preparedness for working in a children's team and attaining higher marks as being linked to
5 this one area.
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10 During the first focus group participants expressed the desire for further sessions in University
11 to prepare them for placement, this is despite pre-placement visits being carried out and
12 practitioners' regular involvement with the programme. However, when asked what they
13 would like to leave out of other sessions to make space for this, no-one could think of anything
14 that they would have liked less of or do without. Moreover, students were in agreement that
15 they would not have wanted the length of the course to be different. The majority of participants
16 from both focus groups expressed opinions that the University needed to have more of a role
17 in teaching and learning skills of critical analysis using statutory assessments and reports as
18 pedagogical tools.
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24 It is clear from the focus group interviews that participants felt that University was a safe place
25 in which to learn and receive developmental feed-back and feed-forward and to experiment
26 with critical reflection. It appears that placements may need to be encouraged to take on a
27 more educative role, and to acknowledge that students are there to learn and should be
28 supernumery, as opposed to being an extra pair of hands. As noted above, the benefits of
29 case-material within University-based teaching and learning were highlighted. It is common
30 for students to find engagement with critical reflection challenging, threatening and even
31 damaging (Fook and Askeland, 2007) and increased use of case study material may support
32 students to engage with critical reflection in a more positive way, allowing space for practice
33 and experimentation before being exposed to the real-time demands of the practice
34 environment. A study undertaken by Milner and Wolfer (2014) further supported this and could
35 be seen to link with the participants' belief that increased use of case scenarios across their
36 pre-qualifying education and training would support their development and capacity for critical
37 reflection in a more *functional* sense, as research suggests that many students find this
38 challenging (Bransford, 2011; Grant, Kinman and Alexander, 2014; Wilkes and Spivey, 2010).
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49 **Theme 2: 'Surviving' the practice placement.**

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51 For every participant, 'surviving' the placement was articulated during the focus groups as the
52 most compelling experience across their two years of training and the most significant factor
53 linked to their education of, engagement with, and views about critical reflection.
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57 All participants referred to their statutory placement as an extremely challenging experience,
58 and one in which their skills of critical reflection were drawn upon, with two participants using
59 imagery associated with shock and trauma:
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3 *The real world of social work is completely daunting and a really scary place to be...*
4 *I feel like I have been traumatised with all of this, I really do.*

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7 *My experience just, just mirrored that. You just feel you have to hit the ground running.*
8 *There was little time to reflect. Even though you are a student, they just don't care. It*
9 *is a massive shock; the overwhelming amount of work and the expectations on you to*
10 *do it.*

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14 This was further explored, and students were reminded they could access support services
15 both within the university and on placement if needed and that they should be encouraged to
16 discuss these feelings in supervision. Despite or perhaps because of the initial feelings of
17 being overwhelmed the majority of participants who were on placements in children's teams
18 and one in an adults' team said they felt it was challenging to engage with critical reflection at
19 the start of placement, however for some participants this did become easier as the placement
20 developed.

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26 *I think that the placement has helped me when I have been able to access supervision*
27 *by reflecting on individual cases and decisions, why they have been taken, other*
28 *potential decisions that could have been taken and the impact of such decisions. This*
29 *has really enhanced my learning and made the whole issue of critical reflection more*
30 *understandable and 'do-able'.*

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35 Students recognised the importance of reflective and developmental supervision, but also
36 noted the inconsistency of access to supervision and ergo critical reflection across the
37 placement as a whole. This appeared to be intrinsically linked to the expectations placed on
38 students. All participants in children's teams described their manager and/or team's
39 expectations as unworkable. All participants articulated or agreed with others that the
40 expectations of those allocating and overseeing their work in placement had been very high.
41 For those students who had been on placement in a children's team, these expectations were
42 seen as being unrealistically high. During the focus groups all participants shared an
43 experience of having to 'hit the ground running'.

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50 For one participant:

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52 *I sort of found my placement (pause) basically the same (as the first placement), but*
53 *you're not going to know how to do it until you have actually done it., Reflecting on a*
54 *lack of induction to the placement, the student went on to add –I didn't know how I was*
55 *going to get through this because you are faced with all this stuff and you are thinking,*
56 *Help! Give us a bit of a clue almost?*

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3 Eight of the ten participants felt that their student status had not been recognised within their
4 statutory placement. One participant based in an adult social work team shared:

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7 *I think that as a student you realise that sometimes., erm, you get really hard things to*
8 *do and you think "I don't know how to do this" but no-one is thinking you are a student;*
9 *they are just trying to pass the work along. I had the same caseload as the newly*
10 *qualified SWs...my supervisor said, 'well you are doing great - you are managing it*
11 *and this is what it is going to be like when you qualify'. You don't want to go 'no*
12 *actually, I can't manage. I can't handle it'.*

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17 This experience was not echoed by everyone however, as for another student:

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20 *In my agency there was an understanding that I am a student and not qualified yet,*
21 *there is only so much that I can do at this point.*

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24 Participants discussed what they felt to be a power imbalance between them and the person
25 who was supervising the placement and how this affected their ability to 'survive' the
26 placement. For one:

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29 *you quite often hear from your manager "well when I was on my placement, this, that*
30 *and the other happened....meaning everyone has to be thrown in at the deep-end"*
31 *because they did it and they will be writing my report they expect me to-what can you*
32 *do?*

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37 Another student reflected on the complexities of this:

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39 *I was coming up to the end of my placement and it was going to be tight, but I*
40 *could just about get through, and then I was asked 'would you just? (take on extra*
41 *work) ...and so I said, 'Ok' Famous last words... I can't win, can I?*

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45 Another noted:

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47 *We go in there.... as a student, but we want to prove that we can do this. In my head*
48 *I am thinking I am a social worker and I can do this. So, it's their expectations, but it's*
49 *our expectations as well, we want to prove that we can do it - to others and to*
50 *ourselves.*

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54 The debate moved towards a sense of students having to 'earn their stripes' as highlighted by
55 the quote below:
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3 *The narrative on my placement was that you have to be really, really stressed out,*
4 *otherwise you are no good. Members of staff will repeatedly say...’ When I was a*
5 *student it was really bad’ and so on*
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10 All of the participants related to this experience and agreed that high levels of stress made
11 surviving the placement for the required 100 days the ultimate goal and served as a barrier to
12 critical reflection and their learning more generally.
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15 **Discussion of theme 2**

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17 Participant’s experiences resonate with Wilks and Spivey’s (2010) studies exploring resilience
18 and student’s adjustment to academic stress (Hitchcock et al 2020; Wilks and Spivey, 2010).
19 The majority of students found placements to be very stressful, attributing as key factors the
20 fast-paced nature and level of expectations, findings that correlate with previous studies
21 undertaken by Grant, Kinman and Alexander (2014). All participants shared a belief that they
22 needed more preparation for the realities of the social work role and time to meaningfully
23 reflect on their individual experiences. Support on placement is key to learning and ‘thriving’
24 on placement. Four participants reflected on how fortunate they felt to have had a supportive
25 manager and highlighted that as a result, they felt safe to admit if they did not understand
26 something. Other participants felt that they had not experienced a safe context in which to
27 learn and develop. Despite placements being audited by the University to ensure they were
28 appropriate and fit for purpose, students in both focus groups felt that it was a ‘lottery’ in terms
29 of the support they received. Several students said they were challenged by having no access
30 to reflective supervision during their placement. Lack of supervision and support does not
31 however diminish the importance of critical reflection - if anything it is even more necessary.
32 Dwyer (2007, p.53) noted that cultures within organisations that placed value on “reflective,
33 emotionally-attuned practice also sponsor interventions that are constructive and promote
34 professional mind-sets open to complexity and challenge rather than being bureaucratically-
35 closed and procedurally-driven”. **The financial pressures placed on local authorities raises**
36 **questions regarding the social work profession being boxed into an unworkable position. One**
37 **of the impacts of this appears to be the lack of access social work students have to consistent,**
38 **quality supervision and space for critical reflection.** For Howe (2007) it is “extraordinarily
39 remiss that so few social workers have reflective supervision, given the emotionally-
40 demanding and stressful nature of the work”, warning that failure to support social workers
41 runs the risk of “blunting, even destroying the most important resource organisations have”
42 (p.3).
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3 Although it was acknowledged by participants that the placement experience had been a
4 relatively difficult one, all participants managed to complete their placements successfully and
5 there was a consensus in their acknowledgment of a shift in their perceptions towards the end
6 of the placement:
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10 *We do feel more confident and capable in this area (critical reflection) now, don't we?*
11

12 The articulation by participants that critical reflection had become a process that happened
13 spontaneously both in respect of practice and personal experiences was significant and was
14 attributed by participants to their personal development and tenacity as much as to learning
15 from placement and at University.
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19 **Recommendations**

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21 As Fook (1996) asserts, all social work practice is grounded in theory, and critical reflection is
22 no exception. For students, any process of theorising involves meaning making, irrespective
23 of whether the practitioner is consciously aware of this or not. Hothersall (2016) acknowledges
24 this position and highlights the dynamic and cyclical process whereby theory is abstracted
25 from practice experience and consequently then further informs practice. Hothersall (2019)
26 argues cogently for an inductive approach towards knowledge-creation, highlighting the
27 importance of measuring the impact of this on practice and the outcomes achieved in people's
28 lives. Hothersall's (2016; 2019) cyclical approach has the potential to play an important role in
29 pedagogical endeavours that aim to promote and facilitate critical reflection and analysis and
30 could usefully and practically be applied by educators in the field as well as within the
31 academy. This takes time, and as Caffrey and Fruin et al (2020) suggest, as well as the
32 effectiveness of the curriculum in preparing social work students for practice, time must be
33 provided to students in order that they have the opportunity to reflect on practice learning in a
34 safe environment. This research and subsequent theoretical formulations emphasise the
35 importance of a planned induction, the use of exemplars, availability of support, guidance and
36 feedback for students on placement regardless of how fast-paced the working environment is.
37 It is recommended by universities that these features are discussed and recorded before
38 students begin placement, however greater consistency across placements is needed, as well
39 as more attention being given to the reality of this occurring. Recommendations in brief are
40 that:
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- 54 • Teaching at University to include an opportunity for critical incident analysis.
55 Specifically, this should explore a critical incident via a case that occurred on first
56 placement and will include tutor and peer feedback to both foster confidence and
57 develop understanding of critical reflection.
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- Fostering students' resilience to the pressures of the social work role is of crucial importance. It is the belief of the researchers that students should undertake a module dedicated to understanding and developing resilience and exploring critical reflection in depth prior to their final placement.
- Additional sessions should be provided during placement to enable students to share challenges they may be experiencing. This may provide an opportunity for University tutors to intervene and support students in a timely way before concerns escalate.
- The importance of ongoing and refresher training needs to be emphasised to qualified social workers, particularly practice educators and if necessary agreement sought at a strategic level for this to be seen as an essential part of their development.

Limitations

This study is not without its limitations, it was a small-scale project focussing on one programme at one English University. Electing to use a different method such as individual interviews may have yielded more substance and depth, however, was prohibited by time and resources. Having both focus groups follow the same set of questions would have allowed a greater degree of consistency and generalizability, although may have limited the range of topics discussed. Despite being given that emphasised critical reflection, participants tended to focus on their experiences of practice placements *per se*. These experiences were undoubtedly fresh in their minds and on reflection the researchers felt that conducting the research at a different point in the programme would have yielded different results. Although the findings highlighted the advantages of an increase in case study-based teaching to promote critical reflection and analysis within assessments, there are potential difficulties in this. Focusing heavily on specific assessment frameworks may be at the expense of the 'art' of assessment and the 'bigger picture'. It is important to recognise that specific guidelines can and often are subject to changes by government. Moreover, despite the experiences and contributions of the participants, not all students will go on to work in child protection or the statutory sector and therefore teaching and learning needs to be able to encompass assessment and intervention in its broadest sense as highlighted in the PCF. Participants appeared to come to an acknowledgement that there should be more recognition of this within placements.

Further research

The authors contend that future studies are needed to explore a number of key areas:

- Factors that prevent students from sharing their concerns about placement issues;

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- 3 • Links between critical reflection and the development of resilient practitioners;
- 4
- 5
- 6 • Impact of the underlying crises (perceived or otherwise) in social work on practitioner's
- 7 resilience and staff retention (see for example Laidlaw et al 2020 for a similar research
- 8 agenda).
- 9
- 10 • Longitudinal studies focusing on students' capacity for critical reflection through initial
- 11 training and early years of qualified practice.
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14 In conclusion there are implications for students, practice learning, education and critical
 15 reflection that have been identified in this study. **Students participating in this research**
 16 **provided evidence of unhelpful and at times inappropriate behaviours and comments from**
 17 **colleagues and educators in practice placement. This appears to be indicative of a culture of**
 18 **learning which clearly needs to be addressed.** Questions have been raised as to ways most
 19 likely to promote and foster students' confidence and capacity for critical reflection thus
 20 providing fertile ground for future projects. The complexity and uncertainty that characterises
 21 much of UK social work in the 21st century, including the impact of austerity and cuts to
 22 services at a time of increased demand needs to be recognised, articulated and addressed.
 23 Studies such as this draw exclusively on the voices of emerging practitioners and add to the
 24 body of knowledge as well as developing an important discourse.

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 32 *Since this paper was written I am sorry to report that Jane Walker has passed away.
 33 Responsibility for completion has been assumed by corresponding author Valerie Gant and
 34 any errors or omissions are acknowledged to be solely hers.

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