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Social Work Students Sharing Practice Learning Experiences: Critical Reflection as Process and Method

Jane Walker[†] and Valerie Gant

This paper offers a commentary regarding the centrality of critical reflection in social work before discussing a research project drawing on a sample of ten social work students as they approached the end of their social work training in one English university. The original intention of the research was to focus solely on students' perceptions of critical reflection, but when using a more reflexive approach, we identified that participants utilised the focus groups as an opportunity to discuss their practice learning experiences per se before considering and discussing critical reflection. Most students were placed in child protection social work teams and discussed how they felt unprepared for such a fast-paced and stressful environment. Participants felt that the expectations some practitioners had of students were unrealistic, and not always commensurate with the Professional Capabilities Framework. Students highlighted the use of practice scenarios in developing their knowledge and skills particularly when considering their application of critical reflection. This study highlights the significance of adequate preparation for practice and argues for a more focussed agenda for future research exploring the culture of learning, including those factors that inhibit students sharing their concerns as well as the training needs of educators.

Keywords: social work education; practice placements; critical reflection

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, 522) suggest that critical reflection can be distinguished from the

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

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 conceptualisation - 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; 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, 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 opposed to one overall Chief Social Worker may be seen to be at odds with the underlying ethos of pre-qualifying genericism within UK social work education.

Although the UK government has made their views about social work education known, student voices are seldom sought or heard. Evidence from a review of the literature suggests there are gaps relating to pedagogical methods and strategies that may promote students' confidence and capacity to engage in critical reflection (Higgins and Goodyer 2015; McCusker 2013). This highlights the need for further studies to explore the effectiveness of particular pedagogical approaches and strategies and provided the rationale for the study under discussion. Social Work practitioners operate in an increasingly globalised context (Morley 2004) and by engaging with critical reflection as a pedagogical method, the significance of reflection and critical analysis creates

greater possibilities to recognise and challenge structural inequalities, for as Twikirize (in Spitzer and Twikirize 2014, 146) states: 'Social work educators in collaboration with social welfare agencies have a public role and obligation to produce professionally competent, critically aware, culturally sensitive social work practitioners'. Insights into the relevance and practice value of critical reflection from students' perspectives is seen as key in reducing the theory/practice divide (Gant et al. 2019), whilst exploring students' experiences of critical reflection offers the potential to identify and understand the range of variables that may promote or inhibit reflective learning (Higgins and Goodyer 2015; Staempfli, Adshead, and Fletcher 2015).

Literature Review

Beginning with literature published in 2003 (the point from when the main qualification route into social work in the UK has been via university education) and going through to 2019 an in-depth search of the literature was undertaken. The search terms were 'teaching' AND 'critical reflection' AND 'social work'. Additional filters were used to ensure that only peer-reviewed journal articles were identified. This search resulted in twenty-five results, some of which were duplicated articles.

After reading the full texts only ten of these were deemed relevant as several papers focussed on specific contexts or critical reflection with specific client/age groups and were therefore not relevant for this project. In addition to the Boolean search, professional websites were also consulted including the British Association of Social Workers, College of Social Work and Higher Education Academy. The review also included reference to Fook, Freire, Mezirow and Schön whose work was outside of the initial timeframe as they have produced seminal pieces of work about critical reflection and transformative learning and Ixer's controversial 1999 paper. Several of the articles relating to critical reflection focus on trying to clarify or 'pin-down' a definition of what this means (D'Cruz, Gillingham, and Melendez 2005; Fook 2002, 2007; Fook and Askeland 2007; Theobald, Gardner, and Long 2017; Thompson and Pascal 2012; Thompson and Thompson 2008). Ixer's article 'There's no such thing as reflection' (1999), criticised the scale in which reflective practice had become established in the social work discipline without any agreed consensus of what it was or evidence-base to confirm its effectiveness. This has since been noted more widely in the literature (Bay and Macfarlane 2011; D'Cruz, Gillingham, and Melendez 2005; Fook 2007; Fook and Askeland 2007; Theobald, Gardner, and Long 2017; Thompson and Pascal 2012) with an attempt by the aforementioned academics' to clarify the nature, purpose and value of critical reflection within social work.

Ixer revisited his controversial work in 2010 and concluded that in spite of considerable discourse within the profession, very little social work research has been

published that provides evidence of its value. In Ixer's (2010) review of the critical reflection literature, he highlights the influence of academic Jan Fook who has been one of the most prolific contributors to this debate. Drawing on Fook's (2002, 2007) and Fook and Askeland (2007) work, Ixer (2010, 80) concurs that through the process of critical reflection, potential positive outcomes can be achieved: particularly in relation to an increased understanding of theory, self-awareness and ability to work with uncertainty. These potential outcomes emerged in all of the articles and all authors referred to Fook's contributions to the body of literature on critical reflection within their papers. The literature search was ongoing throughout the course of the study.

Methodology, Design and Methods

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

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

Focus groups were chosen as the most appropriate means of data-collection as they offered the potential for learning more about how students (both shared and individually) obtain knowledge and develop their understanding of critical reflection.

Cyr (2016) suggests that focus groups offer the possibility of producing a significant amount of data about a topic in a less time-consuming way than individual interviews. This method offers the opportunity to promote interaction between participants and can also serve as a helpful vehicle through which participants enable each other to explore and challenge their views.

The sample was purposive (Carey 2013) as participants were identified based on experience of the phenomenon under investigation. An important consideration was the participants' level of insight into the study because as students they needed to be able to discuss their views about the research topic in detail (Krueger and Casey 2015).

The selection criteria were post-graduate social work students at one English University who had completed two practice placements and were in the final month of their programme. Out of a potential 25 students 10 agreed to participate.

In order to recruit the participants, an information poster was displayed at the participating University. Voluntary participation was emphasised and caution was exercised in an attempt to avoid students feeling a sense of pressure to participate. All the participants ($n=10$) who initially requested information took part. Potential participants were all students on a programme where the researchers were academic teaching staff. The researchers had not taught this cohort or assessed any of their work. The timing of the project was planned to ensure all student's academic work was submitted and marked by the point of the focus groups, in order to minimise the risk that students felt obliged or coerced to participate.

The group composition was reflective of the overall make-up of the cohort and the demography of the local area in terms of age, gender and ethnicity. The participants' ages ranged from 20-50 years. Two participants were male, nine described themselves as 'White' one as 'Black'.

Ethical approval for the research project was obtained from the faculty ethics committee and signed consent obtained from participants. All of the participants had experienced practice placements in English Local Authority social work teams, six in child protection teams, one in a fostering and adoption placement and three in adults' team placements.

Given the number of participants a decision was taken by the researchers to hold two focus groups of five participants with each group assigned a different area to discuss. This was primarily on a practical basis to assist with transcription and to facilitate in-depth discussions around a specific topic. The first focus group explored students' experience of critical reflection from a university-based teaching and learning perspective.

This group were asked the following questions:

Please discuss the role that teaching and guided reading within taught modules in university played in your development of understanding of critical reflection.

What if any, were the mitigating factors that influenced active engagement in the process of learning about and using critical reflection in university?

What factors have influenced the degree to which you have been able to incorporate critical reflection in your university-based learning and assessments?

Similar questions were posed to participants in the second focus group, with the word 'university' being replaced with 'practice placement'

Students were allocated randomly to a group. Each focus group lasted approximately 75 min.

Analysis

Analysis of the focus groups was based on the entire data set. The audio recordings were transcribed by hand by the researchers, believing, as Braun and Clarke (2006, 21) assert that 'Time spent in transcription is not wasted, as

it informs the early stages of analysis and a far more thorough understanding of the data is achieved’.

Following transcription codes were assigned across the data-set. This was achieved by using different colours to highlight information within the transcript that was relevant to each code and by making notes in the margin of the script. This took a significant amount of time in order to avoid missing something important or moving to the next stage prematurely. Being mindful of Braun and Clarke (2006, 21) cautionary warning that, refinement of codes ‘could go on ad-infinitum’ the researchers ceased when it appeared that any refinements were not adding anything substantial, believing that the potential themes had emerged and it was possible to see, ‘how they fit together and the overall story they tell about the data’ (Braun and Clarke (2006, 21).

All codes were then examined in order to identify potential themes. In order to avoid imposing inaccurate meaning to the data, Jowett and O’Toole (2006) advice was followed in investing time and effort to identify and understand the subjective meanings of the participants as reflected in the transcripts: This provided important ‘checks-and-balances’ on the researcher’s ‘analysis of accounts’ (454).

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

Initially nine potential themes were apparent:

1. Students not feeling prepared enough for placement;
2. More practice application of critical reflection needed in University teaching and assessment;
3. Power imbalance between students on placement and their practice educators;
4. No recognition during placement of the student status;
5. Lack of support and guidance during placement;
6. Variation of practice educators;
7. Issues articulated regarding ‘Surviving’ the practice placement;
8. Barriers to and strategies that support critical reflection;
9. Students feeling that unrealistic expectations were placed on them by practice educators.

Having identified themes, it was important to check if they worked in relation to the coded extracts from the dataset. During this process, a search for

negative case examples enabled variations and contradictions to be analysed. This resulted in a refinement of what had initially appeared to be potential themes. Some of these, for example students feeling that unrealistic expectations were placed on them by practice educators, contained insufficient evidence across the dataset to be a theme. This was not disregarded as it was a strong feature of several accounts expressed by participants, however it was subsumed into an overarching theme.

Gringeri, Barusch, and Cambron (2013) found only 16% of all qualitative SW research papers published between 2008 and 2010 located themselves and the impact of self in their research. The researchers were keen not to overlook this important aspect, particularly in the process of data analysis and a series of measures were taken these included member-checking, negative case analysis, use of supervision, reflexive journal and peer-debriefing (Hays et al. 2016).

As the process developed it became obvious that two areas could be described as ‘overarching’ covering the majority of points and appearing to be underpinned by and related to challenges regarding how students’ obtain knowledge and develop understanding of critical reflection.

- Theme 1. The challenge of not being prepared enough for practice placement; (Subtheme 1, 2, 4 and 8)
- Theme 2. ‘Surviving’ the practice placement; (Subtheme 3, 5, 6, 7, 9)

Understanding how students obtained the knowledge needed in order to prepare for placement and if/how they developed their understanding of critical reflection, ultimately affects their ability to thrive on placement, and is key to enhancing understanding and informing Practice Educators in the field as well as educators in the academy.

Identification, Discussion and Interpretation of Themes

Theme 1: The Challenge of Not Being Prepared Enough for Practice Placement

The majority (five out of 6) of participants who were on placement in child protection teams reported having little or no time made available for their critical reflection and remarked how additionally they received insufficient or no induction, and little support and guidance around key functions of their role, experiencing too, a palpable sense of the power imbalance between themselves and practice educators who oversee the work of students on placement. Virtually all data obtained related to students articulating their thoughts regarding how University could do more to address these concerns within University-based teaching and support students in becoming more realistic about what lay ahead, as well as becoming more resilient practitioners.

All six participants who were on placement in child protection teams felt they had needed more preparation for the realities of the role, as well as time allocated for critical reflection so that the role would not be so much of a shock. One participant opened up the discussion with the following statement:

I felt totally unprepared (for placement) and I do not think you can sum up (pause) just how in-tense and you are not equipped for it... It is just a completely different world and it is like a house has fallen in on you.

For another participant:

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

Another agreed:

You need to be able to explore the risk factors and protective factors and analyse all of that in terms of - do the risk factors outweigh the protective factors? ...you have the whole political stuff that is going on...with Local Authority interpretation of thresholds being very high... That I feel would prepare students a lot more for the reality when you get out on placement and set you up for success.

All participants felt there could have been more preparation but initially there was a difference of opinion in respect of whose role this was.

One noted:

I sort of found my placement (pause) basically the same as yours (named another participant) ... but you're not going to know how to do it until you have actually done it. There is no way of preparing you. There is no way of teaching you. Once you have done it, you will know how to do it, but you won't know how to do it until you have done it.

Such a perspective points towards the role of placement staff as well as University staff in supporting students to make this adjustment.

Discussion of Theme 1

Being prepared for placement links to the work students need to do and the skills they need to attain, in particular in relation to critical reflection and the experiences they have been exposed to prior to their placement. Research into the impact of students having a voice in the choice of assessment (O'Farrell 2009; Long 2012) found that it increased student engagement and attainment. All participants in the focus groups remembered an assessment in a final year module that had involved critical application of knowledge,

theory, law and ethics to an actual case. This use of critically reflecting on a case study made a significant difference to how students engaged with the assessment, and they discussed their overall feelings of preparedness for working in a children's team and attaining higher marks as being linked to this one area.

During the first focus group participants expressed the desire for further sessions in University to prepare them for placement, this is despite pre-placement visits being carried out and practitioners' regular involvement with the programme. However, when asked what they would like to leave out of other sessions to make space for this, no-one could think of anything that they would have liked less of or do without. Moreover, students were in agreement that they would not have wanted the length of the course to be different. The majority of participants from both focus groups expressed opinions that the University needed to have more of a role in teaching and learning skills of critical analysis using statutory assessments and reports as pedagogical tools.

It is clear from the focus group interviews that participants felt that University was a safe place in which to learn and receive developmental feedback and feed-forward and to experiment with critical reflection. It appears that placements may need to be encouraged to take on a more educative role, and to acknowledge that students are there to learn and should be supernumerary, as opposed to being an extra pair of hands. As noted above, the benefits of case-material within University-based teaching and learning were highlighted. It is common for students to find engagement with critical reflection challenging, threatening and even damaging (Fook and Askeland 2007) and increased use of case study material may support students to engage with critical reflection in a more positive way, allowing space for practice and experimentation before being exposed to the real-time demands of the practice environment. A study undertaken by Milner and Wolfer (2014) further supported this and could be seen to link with the participants' belief that increased use of case scenarios across their pre-qualifying education and training would support their development and capacity for critical reflection in a more *functional* sense, as research suggests that many students find this challenging (Bransford 2011; Grant, Kinman, and Alexander 2014).

Theme 2: 'Surviving' the Practice Placement

For every participant, 'surviving' the placement was articulated during the focus groups as the most compelling experience across their two years of training and the most significant factor linked to their education of, engagement with, and views about critical reflection.

All participants referred to their statutory placement as an extremely challenging experience, and one in which their skills of critical reflection were

drawn upon, with two participants using imagery associated with shock and trauma:

The real world of social work is completely daunting and a really scary place to be... I feel like I have been traumatised with all of this, I really do.

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

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

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

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

For one participant:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Another student reflected on the complexities of this:

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

Another noted:

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

The debate moved towards a sense of students having to 'earn their stripes' as highlighted by the quote below:

The narrative on my placement was that you have to be really, really stressed out, otherwise you are no good. Members of staff will repeatedly say...' When I was a student it was really bad' and so on

All of the participants related to this experience and agreed that high levels of stress made surviving the placement for the required 100 days the ultimate goal and served as a barrier to critical reflection and their learning more generally.

Discussion of Theme 2

Participant's experiences resonate with Wilks and Spivey (2010) studies exploring resilience and student's adjustment to academic stress (Hitchcock et al. 2020; Wilks and Spivey 2010). The majority of students found placements to be very stressful, attributing as key factors the fast-paced nature and level of expectations, findings that correlate with previous studies undertaken by Grant, Kinman, and Alexander (2014). All participants shared a belief that they needed more preparation for the realities of the social work role and time to meaningfully reflect on their individual experiences. Support on placement is key to learning and 'thriving' on placement. Four participants reflected on how fortunate they felt to have had a supportive manager and highlighted that as a result, they felt safe to admit if they did not understand something. Other participants felt that they had not experienced a safe context in which to learn and develop. Despite placements being audited by the University to ensure they were appropriate and fit for purpose, students in both focus groups felt that it was a 'lottery' in terms of the support they received. Several students said they were challenged by having no access to reflective supervision during their placement. Lack of supervision and support does not however diminish the importance of critical reflection - if anything it is even more necessary. Dwyer (2007, 53) noted that cultures within organisations that placed value on 'reflective, emotionally-attuned practice also sponsor interventions that are constructive and promote professional mind-sets open to complexity and challenge rather than being bureaucratically-closed and procedurally-driven'. The financial pressures placed on local authorities raises questions regarding the social work profession being boxed into an unworkable position. One of the impacts of this appears to be the lack of access social work students have to consistent, quality supervision and space for critical reflection. For Howe (2007) it is 'extraordinarily remiss that so few social workers have reflective supervision, given the emotionally-demanding and stressful nature of the work', warning that failure to support social workers runs the risk of 'blunting, even destroying the most important resource organisations have' (3).

Although it was acknowledged by participants that the placement experience had been a relatively difficult one, all participants managed to complete their placements successfully and there was a consensus in their acknowledgment of a shift in their perceptions towards the end of the placement:

We do feel more confident and capable in this area (critical reflection) now, don't we?

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

Recommendations

As Fook (1996) asserts, all social work practice is grounded in theory, and critical reflection is no exception. For students, any process of theorising involves meaning making, irrespective of whether the practitioner is consciously aware of this or not. Hothersall (2016) acknowledges this position and highlights the dynamic and cyclical process whereby theory is abstracted from practice experience and consequently then further informs practice. Hothersall (2019) argues cogently for an inductive approach towards knowledge-creation, highlighting the importance of measuring the impact of this on practice and the outcomes achieved in people's lives. Hothersall's (2016, 2019) cyclical approach has the potential to play an important role in pedagogical endeavours that aim to promote and facilitate critical reflection and analysis and could usefully and practically be applied by educators in the field as well as within the academy. This takes time, and as Caffrey et al. (2020) suggest, as well as the effectiveness of the curriculum in preparing social work students for practice, time must be provided to students in order that they have the opportunity to reflect on practice learning in a safe environment. This research and subsequent theoretical formulations emphasise the importance of a planned induction, the use of exemplars, availability of support, guidance and feedback for students on placement regardless of how fast-paced the working environment is. It is recommended by universities that these features are discussed and recorded before students begin placement, however greater consistency across placements is needed, as well as more attention being given to the reality of this occurring. Recommendations in brief are that:

- Teaching at University to include an opportunity for critical incident analysis. Specifically, this should explore a critical incident via a case that occurred on first placement and will include tutor and peer feedback to both foster confidence and develop understanding of critical reflection.
- 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 generalisability, 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. Focussing 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;
- Links between critical reflection and the development of resilient practitioners;
- Impact of the underlying crises (perceived or otherwise) in social work on practitioner's resilience and staff retention (see for example Laidlaw et al. 2020 for a similar research agenda).
- Longitudinal studies focussing on students' capacity for critical reflection through initial training and early years of qualified practice.

In conclusion there are implications for students, practice learning, education and critical reflection that have been identified in this study. Students participating in this research provided evidence of unhelpful and at times inappropriate behaviours and comments from colleagues and educators in practice placement. This appears to be indicative of a culture of learning

which clearly needs to be addressed. Questions have been raised as to ways most likely to promote and foster students' confidence and capacity for critical reflection thus providing fertile ground for future projects. The complexity and uncertainty that characterises much of UK social work in the 21st century, including the impact of austerity and cuts to services at a time of increased demand needs to be recognised, articulated and addressed. Studies such as this draw exclusively on the voices of emerging practitioners and add to the body of knowledge as well as developing an important discourse.

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