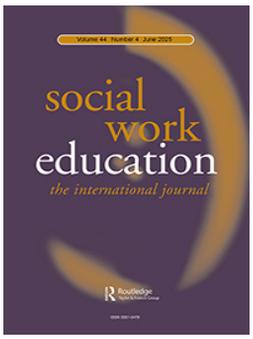

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A third way: off-team practice educators in social work education

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ABSTRACT

In Social Work, Practice Educators (PEs) are termed 'on-site' or 'off-site' depending on whether they work in the same location as the student they are supporting, or are 'physically located away from the learners practice area'. Here, we trial and examine a third model: 'off-team' practice education. An off-team PE works in the same local authority (LA) as the student but in a different team, providing some familiarity and distance. We hypothesized that this model could be more favorable to LAs, providing some advantages of off-site and on-site models. Using focus groups, we explored student and PE experiences of the off-team model and compared them with experiences of the on-site model. We found that off team education offers a viable pathway for supporting students, but there are differences to recognize to maximize advantages and mitigate disadvantages. The significance of our study for practice education lies in its exploration of the potentials and limitations of the off-team model, particularly regarding supervision, assessment, and the development of professional relationships. We conclude by offering reflections on how educators might more effectively operationalize both on-site and off-team models to maximize their respective strengths.

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Introduction

National and international studies have highlighted that social work students view placements as the most beneficial part of their training (see Brodie & Williams, 2013 re Scotland; Egan et al., 2023 re Australia; Roulston et al., 2022 re Ireland; and Wayne et al., 2010 re North America). Indeed, fieldwork has been described as the 'signature pedagogy' of social work education (Asakura et al., 2018; Olson-Morrison et al., 2019; Wayne et al., 2010). Accordingly, the Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training (2020) recognize practice placements as a 'critical component of professional social work education' (Ioakimidis & Sookraj, 2021, p. 168) and recommend that they should constitute 'at least 25% of the overall education activity within courses' (p. 169). Whilst fieldwork requirements on social work courses vary by country, those with regulatory

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bodies invariably specify minimum placement days/hours, e.g. see Australia (AASW, 2024), Canada (CASW, 2024), Ireland (CORU, 2024), and South Africa (Mugumbate, 2020).

Many countries also encourage practice placements in statutory settings to prepare students for legally mandated services. However, statutory social work roles are notoriously demanding and stressful (Maddock, 2024; Ravalier et al., 2021) and concerns have been raised that statutory placements may not always be conducive to positive learning (Walker & Gant, 2021, pp. 10–13). Furthermore, the role of PEs in statutory settings can be particularly challenging, characterized by a lack of workload relief, poor financial reward and problems retaining experienced workers (Scott, 2023). It is, therefore, important to understand factors which can enhance PE and student experiences of statutory placements.

Whilst the working relationship between student social worker and PE is not the only factor influencing placement experience, it is a central feature (Bailey McHale et al., 2019; Burton, 2020; Roulston et al., 2022; Yeung et al., 2021). In England, the PE takes overall responsibility for student supervision and assessment. They are a key source of mentorship and support, but also responsible for deciding whether the student should pass or fail the placement. It is, therefore, a 'conflictual role' (Finch & Taylor, 2013, p. 247; Yeung et al., 2021, p. 412) holding considerable power (Bailey McHale et al., 2019; Roulston et al., 2022). It is also a challenging role, considering that most PEs concurrently manage their own caseloads (Gregory et al., 2024). Therefore, when considering how students' experience of statutory placements can be enhanced, it makes sense to consider how relationships between students and PEs can be improved and/or better supported.

Whilst the quality of statutory social work placements is of international significance, it is particularly relevant in England, where there is a requirement for at least one statutory placement (SWE, 2021), most commonly a Local Authority (LA). The need to focus on the PE role in supporting students has recently been acknowledged by Social Work England (SWE), the regulatory body for social workers in England. SWE commissioned a report into the role of PEs (Gregory et al., 2024) which they describe as 'a necessary step towards developing our approach to the regulation of practice education' (Social Work England, 2024). At present, the role of the PE is not regulated in England (Gregory et al., 2024), instead PEs are expected to adhere to the British Association of Social Workers Practice Educator Professional Standards (PEPS). This is likely to change, given that the first recommendation made by Gregory et al. (2024, 10) was for 'registration and regulation' of the PE role, aligning with the interventionist agenda SWE have adopted toward social work education more broadly (Hanley & Kerr, 2023). It is likely that these reforms will aim to 'standardise' elements of the PE role, including 'frameworks for assessment' (Social Work England, 2024). Given that reform to the role of PEs in England appears imminent, this research contributes valuable insights of national significance during a pivotal period of transformation. We next introduce models of practice education before outlining our approach to the study.

Models of practice education

Practice Educators (PEs) are generally classified as 'on-site' or 'off-site' (BASW, 2022), depending on whether they work within the student's organization or are based

elsewhere (BASW, 2022, p. 3). Off-site PEs, also called 'independent PEs' (Gregory et al., 2024; Social Work England, 2024), are not employed by the student's placement organization. However, there is a third, unexamined model; 'off-team' practice education. To clarify this emerging role, it is useful to first outline key features of the on-site and off-site models.

On-site practice education

On-site PEs are employed by and physically located within the learner's placement. A benefit of this model is that on-site PEs are more likely to have a 'contextual understanding of the placement, agencies, and parties involved' (Zuchowski, 2016, p. 424), and their physical presence on placement is likely to make it easier for students to gain support in a timely manner (Burton, 2020, p. 154). Given that on-site PEs work in the same organization, they can provide case supervision and formative feedback, whereas when an off-site PE (discussed below) is allocated, an 'on-site supervisor' (OSS) is allocated to perform these functions (Cleak et al., 2016, p. 2035).

Off-site practice education

Off-site PEs are often independently employed, i.e. not employed by the agency where the student is placed. They are located away from the learner for most of the placement but typically visit the student for supervision sessions and direct observations of practice. Several studies have examined off-site and/or on-site practice education (Burton, 2020; Egan et al., 2023; Maynard et al., 2015; Zuchowski, 2016). Off-site practice education is often presented as less favorable than on-site practice education (Cleak & Smith, 2012; Egan et al., 2023) or a 'last resort' (Egan et al., 2023, p. 521; Maynard et al., 2015, p. 531). However, this model does have advantages as off-site PEs tend to be more experienced, stay in role longer and report greater flexibility (Gregory et al., 2024). Given they are independent of the placement agency, off-site PEs are also able to practice 'at a distance from organisational politics', offering students a 'safe mental and physical space' (Egan et al., 2023, p. 526), to focus on critical reflection, linking theory to practice, and broader social work issues.

Off-team practice education

Off-team practice education is not currently recognized as a distinct model. We employ the term to describe a situation where a PE is employed by the LA where the student is placed but works within a different team. No studies have evaluated the effectiveness of this model, nor is there currently any data to indicate how frequently these arrangements are used in England, or beyond. Anecdotally, this model appears to enable LAs to draw upon qualified PEs within their employment rather than having to commission someone externally. This may be necessary in the face of a national shortage of PEs (SWE, 2022). The off-team PE may be more likely to have a contextual understanding of the agency, access to internal systems and proximity to provide formative feedback and support. But as with the off-site model, an OSS must still be allocated, leaving the off-team PE with

a greater degree of detachment from organizational politics to provide that 'safe mental and physical space' (Egan et al., 2023, p. 526). In short, there is the potential for the off-team model to encompass benefits and/or limitations of on-site and off-site models, but further research is needed, which provided the impetus for this study.

Our research question was *how do students and PEs experience on-site and off-team models of practice education?* A limitation of this question was that it does not focus on 'off-site' practice education, but we justified a comparison of just two models given there is already evidence of differences between on-site and off-site education (e.g. Egan et al., 2023; Maynard et al., 2015), and given we were interested in the off-team model as a potential alternative to the on-site model of local authority social work.

Methods

Our research design was underpinned by a social-constructivist epistemological position, which posits that reality is not objectively discovered but socially constructed (or co-constructed) through human interaction, shared experiences, and interpretation (Payne, 2021). In other words, there are alternative ways of looking at events, and we interpret events according to how we see the world (Chiari & Nuzzo, 2009). Our epistemology directly informed our methodological choices. Focus groups were identified as an appropriate method of data-collection given they foreground meaning-making through interaction and shared reflection and can capture a range of attitudes, knowledge and experiences in one session (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). Focus groups also place multiple perspectives in dialogue (Gibbs, 1997) and can offer reflective value for practitioners (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013, p. 55).

Procedure and sample

Participants were identified through a purposive sampling strategy to recruit those in a position to have knowledge of the approaches under investigation (Denscombe, 2014). In practical terms, we advertised through a regional social work teaching partnership for student social workers who were about to undertake an LA placement, and LA PEs. Eighteen participants from the north of England were involved in the study: nine student social workers and nine PEs. Participants were predominantly female and included a range of ages and career stages. We did not invite participants to disclose demographic information and did not focus on different experiences across demographics or career stages. Such differences are something future research could usefully examine. We did notice that most PE participants were in training. On reflection, this is likely due to some of the research team working as practice education trainers and, therefore, having access to trainees. To reduce potential for coercion, particularly of participants known to facilitators, we stressed that refusal or withdrawal would not impact working relationships or student assessments in any way.

Those who expressed an interest in the research were invited to an information session delivered by authors 1 and 2. Potential participants were given written information to consider and a consent form. Once informed consent was obtained, and with the support of LA placement providers, PE participants were allocated to work with students either 'on-site' (within their own team) or 'off-team'

(supervising a student based in another team in their LA). Student participants were matched to LA placements following the usual allocation process. Whilst the study had no impact on where a student's placement took place, it did influence the location of their PE, because there was a need to ensure that approximately half of PEs were on-site and half off-team. Those students who consented to participate were all final-year undergraduate (BA) social work students (from two universities), undertaking a final-year, 100-day placement in an LA in England. Prior to placements commencing, e-mails were sent to participants to clarify arrangements. From this point on, the 100-day placements continued as normal, without any involvement from the research team. Focus groups were scheduled at the end of placements to gather feedback.

Focus groups

Focus groups are a qualitative research method involving small group interviews to stimulate discussion of a specific topic (Linhorst, 2002). Rather than gathering individual accounts, focus groups enable interaction between people, allowing them to respond to one another and reflect on shared or contrasting experiences. This method was fitting given the relational and reflective nature of social work and practice education. The interactive format also aligned well with our social-constructivist epistemology, which values knowledge as co-constructed through social interaction.

Focus groups were facilitated online, in 2024, by authors 1 and 2 using Microsoft Teams secure videoconferencing. This format was more practical than in-person groups given the diverse geographical locations of students and varied timings of placements. Focus Groups were planned several weeks in advance; participants were encouraged to join from a private environment and maintain the confidentiality of group discussions. Discussions were recorded (with consent) to enable transcription and analysis. The 18 participants were divided into four groups depending upon their role and the model they experienced:

- Focus Group 1 – 'Off-team' PEs (4 participants)
- Focus Group 2 – Students with 'off-team' PEs (5 Participants)
- Focus Group 3 – 'On-site' PEs (5 Participants)
- Focus Group 4 – Students with 'on-site' PEs (4 Participants)

These small, role-based groups were designed to encourage open discussions between similarly located participants. Whilst focus groups can facilitate rich, co-constructed data, participants may refrain from disclosing certain information in the presence of other participants (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). To minimize this limitation, ground rules encouraged confidentiality (within safeguarding limits). Small groups were arranged to help quieter voices to be heard and increase the chance of honest responses (Bourne & Winstone, 2021).

Focus-groups followed a semi-structured interview format to provide some consistency, whilst allowing for organic discussions to develop. Set questions were:

- In relation to working with your Practice Educator/student, what worked well?

- In relation to working with your Practice Educator/student, what didn't work so well?
- What was your relationship like with your Practice Educator/Student?
- What were your supervisions like with your Practice Educator/Student?
- Do you think it would have been better, or worse, if your Practice Educator/Student were on the same team as you/on a different team to you?

While these questions were personal and could equally have been suited to individual interviews, focus groups were purposefully chosen to enable participants to build on each other's insights and reveal shared themes and contrasting views. Student social workers and practice educators are also accustomed to reflective group dialogue given professional norms encourage such communication. Ethical safeguards, including confidentiality requests and skilled facilitation, were in place to ensure psychological safety, making focus groups appropriate and valuable for this inquiry.

Data analysis

Authors 3 and 4 used King and Horrocks (2010, pp 152–166) thematic analysis framework, which draws on earlier work from Braun and Clarke (2006), to construct themes from the focus group data. An initial 'descriptive coding' stage involved reading and re-reading focus group transcripts, highlighting material and attaching descriptive codes (such as 'time to reflect'; 'critical'; 'task-oriented'). A second 'interpretive coding' stage involved interpreting meaning and applying interpretive codes (such as 'a detached, critical, reflective learning space' or 'practical, real time learning support'). A third stage joined together interpretive codes and constructed 'overarching themes' from the data. For example, references to reflective and practical forms of learning were assembled in a supervision focused theme: 'Critical and reflective, versus practical and responsive supervision.' As themes were developed, they were shared with authors 1 and 2, detailed further below.

Reflexivity and credibility

Reflexivity, involving critical self-awareness of our subjectivity, can improve the validity, rigor and integrity of qualitative research by providing information about the context of data collection and analysis (Etherington, 2004). All researchers on this project have previously worked as PEs and so each had a range of past student placement experiences, which needed to be separated from how participants were describing their experiences. We acknowledge our positionality here to improve transparency and trustworthiness. In order to remain close to participant narratives, we used systematic coding and analysis (detailed above) and peer debriefing, which involved discussions among the research team to challenge assumptions or unsupported claims and examine differing interpretations. These strategies enhanced the validity of the research by ensuring the analysis prioritized participant perspectives above researcher preconceptions. Our personal histories were not just an influence to be managed, however, but also a helpful tool. We were relative 'insiders' when approaching local authorities and students having worked in the field. We were 'uniquely positioned to understand' these settings, to engage gatekeepers

and gain access (Kerstetter, 2012). We were also professionally attuned to power dynamics and confidentiality (BASW, 2021).

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of [blanked for review], and the study was approved by the regional social work teaching partnership and Head of Social Work at the University of [blanked for review]. Researchers planned the ethical application together, guided by Economic and Social Research Council good practice for social research (2020); seeking to maximize benefits, integrity and transparency, and minimize harm. All participants were supplied with written participant information sheets, which outlined study details, how data would be used, and their right to withdraw. This information was reiterated verbally at the start of focus groups. Once they had considered the information, all participants signed a written consent form. An important ethical consideration was the risk that discussions could cause distress. Fortunately, this was not the case. However, we signposted participants to independent support and counseling, should it have been needed. As focus group were facilitated by social work lecturers, some researchers were known to some participants, which could have influenced decisions to take part and/or discussions. To minimize these risks, all researchers stressed that refusal to participate or respond to specific questions, or a decision to withdraw, would not impact professional relationships or students' assessments in any way.

Findings

The findings of this study are presented under three themes, which were developed from all four focus groups. These are *(i) Supervision: critical and reflective versus practical and responsive, (ii) Assessment: individual and observational versus collaboratively evidenced; and (iii) Relational proximity: surveillance stress versus boundaried distance.*

Theme 1: supervision: critical and reflective versus practical and responsive

Supervision was characterized differently depending on the model employed. The off-team model appeared to allow for more reflective and critical supervision sessions, whereas supervision with on-site PEs was more focused on case work and often more immediate.

Critical and reflective supervision

> [On-site practice education] became for me a very – like a practical supervision role rather than actually having that time to reflect, so I've really enjoyed being able to step away from that . . . talking about your cases all the time and how you manage that, and really give the student the time separately to reflect on how things are going, and the space I think for [them] to be able to be a lot more honest with me. (PE, Off-team)

> When you're in the same team it gets diluted a lot of the time – I think – because you have so many conversations you don't have that protected ability to be critical and I think when you detach from the team you can be a little bit more critical. (PE, Off-team)

Students who had off-team PEs also stated that supervision sessions were 'less case-focused,' enabling them to focus on critical reflection, theory, and building portfolio evidence:

> With my practice educator we do more reflecting and looking at theories, whereas you don't get to do that in supervision with the manager [on-site supervisor] because we're just going over case management and what I need to do … it's nice to have that reflection time … (Student Social Worker, Off-team)

> I think it's good to have time to go through theories and stuff because managers don't really talk about it because it's not something they have to reflect on really. (Student Social Worker, Off-team)

Practical and responsive supervision

In contrast, students with on-site PEs commented that their supervision was focused on case work, or the direct practical elements of the role:

> My supervisions are more regarding the cases I've got rather than how they link to the PCFs and theories. (Student Social Worker, On-site)

As did on-site PEs:

> One of the things that can crop up, I think, with having students with you is that it might become a bit task-orientated I found, and I have had to keep a bit of a check on that and make sure it's more reflective because if you are monitoring somebody's caseload that they're working on you want to check that everything's been done and it's really tempting to do that in supervision. So, I think that's one of the things I've struggled with. (PE, On-site)

Some on-site PEs purposefully structured their formal supervision sessions to allow space for reflection, in acknowledgment of this tendency to overly focus on practical case work. Other on-site PEs recognized the need for them to 'actively tease out' reflective conversation as part of structured conversations about casework.

A benefit of the on-site model, however, is that it appeared to allow much more informal supervision and PEs and students had discussions outside of formal supervision with much greater frequency. Students with on-site PEs highlighted that it was beneficial to be able to ask for support as and when needed, as opposed to having to schedule in a formal discussion:

> It's like being able to have that informal sort of supervision. And not having to always go and contact my PE, even though I know I can whenever I want, it's just being able to look across the desk, say a name, and say 'can I be supported with this?' And it's like 'yeah,' and then we'll talk about it. (Student Social Worker, On-Site)

On-site PEs also reflected on the benefits of informal supervision, which enabled them to support students day-to-day and observe students informally:

> I think just in terms of your informal observations as well as informal supervision, you can pick up so much. I think certainly for myself, so much more comes from the informal supervision that you do day to day and what you can observe from the rest of the team as well. (PE, On-site)

Relatedly, some students with off-team PEs also expressed some concern about their PEs not being physically present, and some felt that it made the process of supervision more time consuming:

> Where me and my practice educator was meeting up, we'd be there for hours because we'd be going over everything that we'd been doing and it's just less time consuming with the practice educator there because they're actually seeing what you're doing. (Student Social Worker, Off-team)

The degree to which off-team PEs capitalized on opportunities for informal supervision varied. Some provided students with shadowing opportunities on their own team, but more frequently the off-team PEs did not have a physical presence in the student's workplace. For off-team PEs, concerns around informal supervision centered around whether the students had been 'pushed' enough in their practice, for instance one commented:

> You're at a slight disadvantage from not physically being there, so that's my only thing, that I'm not sure they have been pushed to the absolute . . . have they been prepared as much as possible? (PE, Off-team)

Although off-team PEs could feel disadvantaged by not being on-site, they also recognized that when they did see students for supervision, it felt like a 'protected space' and 'protected time' because of the independence offered by their detachment. Likewise, students with off-team PEs valued the fact that their supervision sessions were consistent, or 'set in stone,' and they could speak with someone 'separate.'

Theme 2: assessment: individual and observational versus collaboratively evidenced

Assessment was also characterized differently depending on the model employed, with on-site PEs relying on their own observations and off-team PEs gathering evidence from students, colleagues and stakeholders.

Individual, observational assessment

In addition to providing opportunities for informal supervision, the on-site model appeared to facilitate more informal observation. A benefit of this is that there are plenty of opportunities for students to showcase their development and learning, and for PEs to observe and assess students in practice. In contrast, it appeared more challenging for off-team PEs to observe and assess students in practice. All four off-team PEs discussed feeling disadvantaged by 'not physically being there.' One off-team PE commented:

> If I had been on the same team, I would have been seeing [them] more or pushed [them] and because I'm not seeing it, I'm probably a little more anxious that [they're] not doing as much. (PE, Off-team)

Three of the four off-team PEs had substantial difficulty arranging a direct observation of practice (also mentioned by students), and some felt they missed out on opportunities to observe how students interact, make phone calls, or deal with the demands of the role:

> That kind of nuance, that fluidity of sitting next to people and listening to them going out we haven't got – so it's kind of picking up on different areas isn't it, where we can gather evidence for them to give them the very best evidence to pass. (PE, Off-team)

Similarly, students with off-team PEs expressed concerns about their PE's ability to assess them when not physically present:

> [My PE has] not seen how I'd been in the office and how I'd interacted in conversations and things like that . . . I think that was hard because [they] have the power to fail me, but [they] can't actually see what I'm doing day to day. So [they] don't know whether I'm doing well. I could be doing really poor and [they] could be right, but then I could also do really well. But [they're] not seeing it. (Student Social Worker, Off-team)

Collaboratively evidenced assessment

Whilst reduced physical presence was a concern for both off-team PEs and students, it appeared to have encouraged off-team PEs to be more dynamic in gathering evidence. Various strategies were developed to mitigate the disadvantage of distance. For instance, one PE set up a *WhatsApp* group with the student and OSS, others arranged opportunities on other teams to gather a range of feedback, and some were able to physically situate themselves in the same office as the student at times. One significant advantage of being in the same LA as the student was that PEs could access students' written work:

> See my practice educator, although she's off team, if she wanted to, she could log on to our system and check my written work. (Student Social Worker, Off-team)

In contrast, on-site PEs and students did not appear to have concerns about a lack of evidence to support a pass or being able to schedule in direct observations of practice. Rather, because they could monitor students closely, there appeared to be a concentration of power in the role of on-site PE, which was less reliant on feedback from others. Comments about power imbalance featured more prominently among the students who had on-site PEs (explored further in Theme 3). Off-team PEs appeared to rely more on others for feedback, including students, colleagues, people with lived experience and OSSs. This was challenge for some of the off-team PEs, who were required to assess through discussion what may otherwise have emerged organically in practice:

> I suppose one of the things is that evidence. So, you know when you're talking in supervision you miss a lot of evidence . . . because when you come, they can't remember what they did from day 1–5 from our last supervision. (PE, Off-team)

Two off-team PEs observed that students can 'dampen down' their achievements, or 'sell themselves short,' and one PE reflected on feeling frustrated with the OSS who was reluctant to communicate any negative feedback, which may have informed their assessment.

Theme 3: relational proximity: surveillance stress vs boundaried distance

Finally, the model of practice education influenced relationships between students and PEs and the attendant power dynamics within these relationships. Students with on-site

PEs expressed feeling over-observed whereas the distance provided by the off-team model provided clearer boundaries but also sometimes limited support.

Surveillance stress

Students with on-site PEs often had trouble managing the relationship with their PE because they felt they were being monitored to such a degree that it made them feel uncomfortable:

> You feel like you're being watched constantly. And I think that puts me on edge. That makes me work less proactive, I think . . . It's awful, and then you start making mistakes because you know they are watching you. It's like, if someone's watching you type something, you start making mistakes because you know they're watching. And yeah, I think when my PE was off-site, I didn't have that feeling. I just kind of got on with it. (Student Social Worker, On-site)

The four student participants with on-site PEs perceived that their chances passing or failing hinged upon a positive relationship with their PE, which could be difficult to maintain in such an intense environment. For example, some students shared experiences of coming into the office and venting with colleagues about personal issues, which 'got back' to their PEs. One participant stated, 'when you're walking into the office sometimes you just want to have a moan because you're just tired or something like that' but students sometimes found that news would travel quickly around the office and they were placed in uncomfortable situations wherein they had to discuss personal issues with their PEs which they would have rather had had the opportunity to raise themselves or not discuss at all. The following quote encapsulates this point:

> You can't go to work smiling every day. Sometimes things happen and you're feeling a bit rubbish. And I was thinking – oh no, are they going to fail me because they know all of this? Whereas if I had an off-site Practice Educator, I could have discussed it with them from my point of view rather than them saying 'I feel like this is impacting your practice.' (Student Social Worker, On-site)

Students described having to *learn to not share* anything personal with colleagues, creating a possible risk to student wellbeing. One student stated they stopped talking about how they were feeling altogether, including in supervision:

> It's made me not want to discuss how I'm feeling anymore. And I think it's good having that practice educator off-site because then when you have your supervision with them, I probably would feel like I could openly discuss things like that, whereas I don't feel like I can do that with my on-site practice educator, because I just feel like you're getting judged, and your practice is then getting judged and you worry you're going to fail. (Student Social Worker, On-site)

One student commented that it could feel like they were being assessed on their 'personality' rather than their 'practice,' whereas another described feeling 'paranoid.'

Boundaried distance

Whilst off-team PEs still have the power to pass or fail the students the stress of (over) surveillance was not voiced by their students. Off-team PEs also recognized the benefits of some detachment:

> You can be a little bit more critical because you can kind-of say 'who made that decision?' or 'why do you think they made that?' – and I think because you're not in the same team and they don't feel like you're going to be running back to the manager or another team member saying 'well this is what she said in the meeting' they feel the ability to be a little bit more open and honest about being critical sometimes about the team and the processes. (PE, Off-team)

From the perspective of on-site PEs, a significant challenge was maintaining professional boundaries within an 'intense relationship between student and practice educator . . . that you form really quickly.' All the on-site PEs recognized the importance of setting boundaries from the beginning of placement, but also recognized the challenges of doing so, as boundaries often need to shift depending on circumstances:

> I think that for me that [setting professional boundaries] is definitely one of the important things in terms of building the relationship, but also having that flexibility within those boundaries to step in but also step back where appropriate with the student. (PE, On-site)

However, boundaried distance was not universally experienced as a positive element. One off-team PE commented:

> I feel a little bit like I'm almost bad cop and [the OSS is] good cop – and often I feel like I'm saying 'you haven't had much contact with your service user this week, what's happened?,' or 'why haven't you been lone working?' or 'where's the evidence of this?' but before allowing the student to respond to me and sell herself the OSS will come in and defend the student. (PE, Off-team)

Whilst this perspective was not dominant, on occasion it does appear that detachment could have negative implications, as students felt that their off-team PEs were not always available to support when needed. For instance, one student commented 'it wasn't great all the time' and reflected on an instance when they e-mailed their PE and didn't receive a response for a 'couple of days.' Off-team PEs were also frequently described as being 'busy.'

Discussion

This small-scale study indicates that on-site and off-team models of practice education both offer viable routes for supporting and assessing students. This is useful knowledge for (statutory) placements in England and beyond, which require creative solutions given the impacts of austerity politics (Pantazis, 2016) and a shortage of PEs (SWE, 2022). However, there are key distinctions between the two models, and both have advantages and disadvantages, which are important to consider.

On-site practice education

On-site practice education can benefit students because they are more likely to receive informal support in between supervision sessions, and the on-site PE is more likely to be available to answer questions. The immediacy of support offered through the on-site model is consistent with findings from other studies into on-site practice education (Egan et al., 2023). Statutory placements can be 'extremely challenging' for student social workers (Walker & Gant, 2021); therefore, the

importance of timely access to support should not be understated. Flanagan and Wilson (2018, p. 572) found that the frequency of support provided by 'practice teachers in practicum' correlated positively with students' overall satisfaction and learning on placement, and it does appear that the students in our study supported by on-site PEs valued being able to access support when needed. However, students and PEs working within the on-site model described a tendency for formal supervision sessions to over-focus on practical tasks and case work. Students with on-site PEs verbalized less worry about building evidence to support a pass, and on-site PEs found it easier to assess students because opportunities for (formal and informal) observation were more readily available. The ease of gathering evidence within the on-site model is beneficial for students and PEs, including where a student is at risk of failing placement, as it is well-documented that these can be extremely difficult situations for students and PEs to manage (Burton, 2020; Finch, 2017; Finch & Taylor, 2013; Gibson, 2012; Roulston et al., 2022).

However, the relationship between student and PE has been consistently observed as pivotal to the success or failure of placement (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2019; Flanagan & Wilson, 2018; Lefevre, 2005; Roulston et al., 2018, 2022) and the intensity of the relationship between on-site PE and student within the on-site role can make for an uncomfortable experience for students who described feeling monitored. Indeed, in some cases, this dynamic prevented students sharing personal/welfare issues, which could have been impacting their learning. The balance of power between PE and student is more pronounced within the on-site model as there is less reliance on other stakeholders (above all, an OSS) to support with supervision and assessment. A risk with the on-site model is that students feel as though they are being micromanaged, which could cause frustration and negatively impact confidence and motivation (Shuford, 2019; White, 2010).

Off-team practice education

Off-team practice education appeared to benefit students because they have regular support from a professional who is somewhat detached from their own team, but familiar with the systems they are navigating. Students supported by an off-team PE experienced supervision as an opportunity to critically reflect, apply theory, and draw links between their practice and the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCFs) which echoes the benefits of off-*site* supervision observed by Egan et al. (2023) in an Australian context. Students with off-team PEs did not report being monitored too closely, which meant relationships often felt less intense and less susceptible to micromanagement. However, it could be more challenging to build evidence of learning when the PE is off-team, because there are less opportunities for informal observation. This places an increased responsibility on students to showcase learning through other methods (e.g. reflective logs or joint supervisions with an OSS).

The off-team model is highly reliant on the support of an OSS, because much of the day-to-day supervision is provided by them, as opposed to the PE. This has positive implications in that the responsibility for supporting and supervising students is shared, enabling the OSS to focus on more task-orientated supervision, and PEs to focus on theory and reflection. However, the quality of this model is contingent upon effective communication between the OSS and off-team PE, which is a variable factor.

This research demonstrates that although on-site and off-team models offer viable pathways for learning, support and assessment, there are significant differences between the two. It is important that those facilitating and supporting placements recognize these variable factors in order to match learners and practitioners to the model most suited to their needs or make adaptions to improve experiences. For example:

- Those settings adopting an off-team model could ensure PEs can access to students' written records, base themselves in the same office when needed, and have time for observations and relationship building with OSSs. Consideration could also be given as to whether the PE's area of practice overlaps with work the student is undertaking.
- Those settings using the on-site model could ensure that the responsibility for supporting and assessing students is shared with an OSS and/or colleagues (see Egan et al., 2023, Maynard, 2015). On-site PEs could also take steps to avoid micromanaging students, prioritize formal, critical and reflective supervisions, and identify a buddy or mentor who is detached from organizational politics of the team.

Conclusion

Practice placements are a core part of social work training, but statutory placements can be demanding and stressful, sometimes resulting in negative learning experiences. Practice education is challenging, and the national shortage of PEs in England indicates the urgency of supporting practice learning. To respond to these challenges, we evaluated the under-examined 'off-team' model of practice education, which facilitates PE and student to work for the same local authority but in different teams. Conventionally, PEs are on-site (co-located with students) or off-site (independent educators visiting for assessment purposes). The off-team model shares similarities with these models but has differences. Drawing on focus groups with student social workers and PEs, we explored experiences of on-site and off-team models. There were limitations to our approach given we focused on a relatively small sample in one region of England. As experiences of students and PEs will vary widely, and the context of each LA placement is different, our findings are not generalizable. Moreover, as some of the researchers were known to some of the participants, responses could have been limited by 'social desirability bias (SDB)' or 'the tendency for individuals to present themselves in a favourable or socially desirable manner' (Hall, 2008, p. 205). Despite these limitations, our findings do provide valuable situated insight into how different placement models can be experienced by students and educators. The off-team model facilitated more reflective, critical conversations, whereas the on-site model-centered case work reflections and facilitated more informal supervision and assessment. The off-team model enabled educators to monitor written records due to shared systems, but they also relied on colleagues to gather evidence of learning. Whilst off-team PEs did not have as ready access to evidence of students' progress, students could sometimes feel stifled by the constant presence of the PE, in some cases limiting students from discussing (personal) issues. At

a time when significant reform to the role of PEs in England appears imminent (Social Work England, 2024), this original research makes a significant contribution to the practice education knowledge base by broadening conceptions of social work placement models beyond the binary of 'on-site' and 'off-site.' We hope our small-scale findings inspire further research on the off-team model, including its suitability for individuals with diverse needs and characteristics, and how other variable factors, including on-site supervisors, impact experiences.

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As a research team, some of us had existing relationships with some practice educator-participants (as colleagues) and some student-participants (as their lecturers). We mediated this professional familiarity by stressing that refusal to participle, or withdrawal, would not impact professional relationships in any way. We also discuss this limitation within the text.

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