



Perceptions of Trainee Practice Teachers in Northern Ireland

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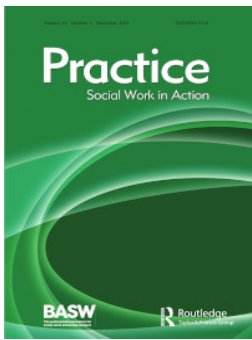
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Perceptions of Trainee Practice Teachers in Northern Ireland: Assessing Competence and Readiness to Practise during COVID 19

Denise MacDermott  and *Caoimhe Harkin-MacDermott*

The supervision of undergraduate social work students on placement is fundamental to their development as 50% of the BSc (Hons) social work degree in the UK comprises practice learning, which is widely acknowledged as the signature pedagogy of the profession. In Northern Ireland practice learning opportunities are supervised by practice teachers. To ensure a consistent quality and supply of practice teachers a Master's programme offering approximately 35 places per year is delivered at Ulster University. The trainee practice teachers had to navigate working on the front line through the COVID 19 pandemic, post graduate study and the professional supervision and assessment of undergraduate social work students on placement. This article presents evidence from a small scale qualitative study evaluating the practice teaching programme conducted with 22 trainee practice teachers. Respondents were asked to complete a semi structured online survey. The evaluation sought their perceptions regarding the duality of their unique experience as a gatekeeper to the profession and student managing the unprecedented challenges of assessing the competence of social work students on placement. Several themes emerged including assessing competence, the student experience and support from the practice assessor. A further outcome was the creation of a Peer Learning Bubble Model.

Keywords: social work education; COVID-19; practice teacher; student competence; assessment; social work placement; Peer Learning Bubble Model

Introduction: The Impact of COVID 19 on the Continuation of Practice Learning Opportunities in Northern Ireland

At the time of writing this paper COVID 19 has infected 67,965,261 cases worldwide resulting in over 1.5 million deaths. There are 14,320,392 confirmed cases of COVID 19 in the EU/EEA and UK and of those 356,836 people

have lost their lives (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control 2020). We are in the middle of a global crisis on an unprecedented scale which has impacted on individuals, communities, employment, housing, health and education and our human rights and freedoms. To add further complexity the island of Ireland with governments North and South of a porous border applied different policies in response to the pandemic.

Higher Education universities closed their doors and migrated learning to an online environment. The COVID 19 pandemic and the restriction of movement and subsequent lockdown led to the decision to prematurely end social work placements in Northern Ireland with immediate effect on the 18th of March 2020. This decision was taken 53 days into the placement cycle. Trainee practice teachers were supervising both first placement students (85 days) and final placement students (100 days). The outcome of this decision had four immediate consequences.

1. The supervision and assessment of undergraduate students on placement ceased.
2. Service users, carers and families who had been working with social work students had their contact suspended with immediate effect.
3. Face to face teaching for trainee practice teachers ceased and the programme delivery was migrated online.
4. Student competence (at this point) had to be assessed and agreed as either competent or not competent.

The Department of Health was under pressure to ensure that final placement students assessed as competent at this point could enter the social work workforce to support the fight against the pandemic and to this end placement assignments were revised regionally, and a fast track exam board was scheduled for the 4th of May 2020.

The authors assert that this paper contributes to the evolving debate on the challenges of professional education in social work during the pandemic. This evaluation aims to report on the perceptions of trainee practice teachers in Northern Ireland, giving voice to their experiences as educators and students during the ‘first phase’ of the COVID 19 pandemic. The data presented within this paper will focus on respondents’ views on

1. Assessing competence.
2. The impact of COVID 19 on their student learning experience.

‘The Road Travelled’: The Social Work Profession in an Evolving and Dynamic Landscape

The British Association of Social Workers (BASW 2020) points to the need to recognise ‘the role of social workers since the “first phase” of the pandemic’.

There was much to learn and even more to respond to as individuals, families and communities were impacted by the Coronavirus. This coincided with the first mandatory lockdown of citizens in Northern Ireland and whilst these measures were necessary to slow the infection rates, it had a massive impact on individual human rights. It is within this dynamic and tense environment that the trainee practice teachers were working and supervising students. They were responsible for assessing whether their allocated students had demonstrated ‘good enough’ practice to contribute to Northern Ireland’s front line response to the largest public health emergency we have faced as a profession. To paraphrase BASW (2020) social workers are the cornerstone to supporting individuals, families and communities and they will occupy a central role in the recovery from the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Interestingly, in the most recent review of the degree, the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC 2019) reported that it was not explicitly clear from their focus groups with front line managers and experienced practice teachers about a shared understanding of the minimum expectations of a ‘social worker at qualifying level’ (p. 25). This is nothing new. Bogo et al. (2012) opined that practice teacher’s decision making was oftentimes associated with personal characteristics and traits. Wilson (2014) as part of his research, shared academics views, again through focus groups, of their satisfaction with the degree curriculum. At that point academics identified social justice and critical reflection as being under represented in the curriculum. These were coined ‘educational priorities’ and ‘employer priorities’ were identified as those fixed on the ‘functional needs of agencies’ (p. 14). This resonates with the work of others (Canavan 2009; Munro 2010) who posit that increased scrutiny on the profession and the influence of the neo liberal agenda has placed the profession between a rock and a hard place [between metrics and the markets].

Training as a Practice Teacher

In Northern Ireland to qualify as a practice teacher experienced social workers must successfully complete the Northern Ireland Practice Teaching Training Programme. This is deemed an Approved Programme by the social work regulator (NISCC, 2017). This post graduate programme is resourced and delivered through established regional partnerships including the Health and Social Care Trusts, Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), Education Authority and criminal justice agencies. Applicants to the programme are employed within these partner agencies. On successful completion of the programme students will obtain 90 Master’s level credits and the Specialist Award in Social Work. NISSC (2019) assert ‘social work practice, education, and research is best served by a reciprocal, symbiotic relationship ... practice teachers occupy an important role within social work education’ (p. 14).

The practice teaching programme promotes a culture of continuous improvement and lifelong learning as described in a Learning and Improvement Strategy for Social Work and Social Care Workers (Department of Health, 2019). The programme consists of two distinct modules. The modules are assessed by three assessment components which includes a formative video task (supervision) and two written assignments over the duration of the programme which operates between September and July annually. The pre COVID 19 iteration of the programme comprised a portion of online learning e.g. asynchronous with recorded podcasts and training videos which students are required to engage with. The programme is taught in six teaching blocks (three days per block) and four of the teaching blocks have one day of asynchronous learning.

The Roles and Responsibilities of the Practice Assessor

Every trainee practice teacher undertaking the Northern Ireland Practice Teacher Training Programme must have a designated practice assessor. It is the responsibility of the employing agency to ensure this resource is in place prior to the student commencing the programme. Practice assessors are qualified social workers with extensive experience of providing professional supervision to staff and students. A further prerequisite to undertaking the role includes holding the practice teacher qualification and having a minimum of two years' experience of practice teaching.

The coronavirus pandemic has had a significant impact on the practice assessor role by placing more demands on individuals who were also working on the frontline. Assessors are allocated nine hours to provide supervision to practice teaching students. Inskipp and Proctor (2001) assert that supervision has three primary tasks, support (restorative), learning and growth (formative) and monitoring (normative) occurring at any one time in the relationship dynamic. Other commentators have devised a range of supervision models and frameworks which can be applied to the social work supervisory relationship (Morrison 2005; Kadushin and Harkness 2015; Wonnacott 2012).

A core requirement of this role is to observe the practice teaching student facilitating supervision on three occasions. Feedback must be constructive including identifying the strengths and areas for development for the practice teaching student. Nicol, Thomson, and Breslin (2014) assert that 'if students are to learn from feedback, they must have opportunities to construct their own meaning from the message received: they must do something with it, ask questions and connect it with prior knowledge' (p. 13). Furthermore, assessors are integral to facilitating the formative supervision video peer feedback session. Access to peer feedback enables practice teaching students to reflect on the supervisory process and their own skills in facilitating supervision effectively, or not.

Gatekeeping: Practice Teaching and the Assessment of Student's Practice

Currer (2009) asserts 'Social work educators have always acted as gatekeepers to the profession' (p. 1481). Practice teachers must use their knowledge and professional judgement to assess if the student is competent and most importantly that their practice is safe and they will 'do no harm' to future service users and families. This is a complex process, further compounded by practising in a global pandemic. There is a plethora of guidance and associated handbooks to support practice teachers (while training and when qualified), in their decision making about what 'good enough' looks like. Of course the social work student is also core to this by understanding and identifying their learning needs, their strengths and areas for development and this information is shared at the beginning of the placement. Often, for students this involves recognising what they are bringing with them to placement, as Furness and Gilligan (2004) concur 'who and what we are, together with our life experience, is relevant to how we practise as social workers' (p. 473). This interplay is present in the supervisory dynamic between the practice teacher and the student requiring acknowledgement of the power of past relationships and experiences (Urdang 2010; MacDermott and McCall 2017).

The Higher Education Institutions' (HEIs) role must also be considered here and their dependency on the information and evidence provided by practice teachers on whether the social work student has passed and demonstrated the required competency standards. In recent years there has been an ongoing marketisation of higher education in the UK with a distinct shift to the 'student as a consumer' which leads to challenges by students, appeals and litigation. Brown (2011) opined 'Institutional rankings and other aids to consumer choice are proliferating whilst universities and colleges devote increasing resources and energy to marketing and branding' (p. 11). This enables failed placement students to 'retake' their placement unless fitness to practise issues have been raised. Finch (2015) acknowledges the high pass rate of placement students and the 'reluctance' of practice teachers to fail students as ongoing concerns in relation to social work education. There is a balance to this recognised by LaFrance, Gray, and Herbert (2004) that 'in a profession that espouses the basic value that all people are capable of growth and change, can we justify excluding people who may be unready rather than unsuitable?' (p. 326).

In this paper, for the trainee practice teachers assessing final year students part of their remit involves deciding whether the student is ready to join the social work 'community of practice' as a newly qualified social worker or to paraphrase Wenger (1998) as a 'newcomer'. Freidson (1986) points to a profession as an occupation and obtaining entry requires the successful completion of professional education. Thus, professional education, in social work, is the core gatekeeping tool employed to screen membership to the profession and the wider community of practice.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative methodology using an online survey which was distributed to all the students enrolled on the practice teacher training programme. To this end, a purposive sampling technique was employed (Sarantakos 2001). The respondents were experienced social workers ranging from 3-20 years post qualifying practice experience. The 2019-2020 student cohort comprised 35 students, 22 of whom responded in the online survey generating a response rate of 63%.

A number of closed questions were included in the online survey which asked respondents to rate their experience of the teaching they received, the online support available and the individual support they received from their practice assessor. Data from closed questions were transferred onto a Microsoft Excel database.

In addition, open questions were included to elicit respondents' perceptions of their decision making and assessment of student competence, the impact of COVID 19 on their learning experience and the delivery of the module. Responses from the open questions were analysed using thematic content analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79) define thematic analysis as 'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' and present six phases of thematic analysis in their paper. To this end, the authors employed an inductive thematic analysis of the data by reading and re-reading and immersing themselves in the data jotting down thoughts and ideas. From this baseline the authors began searching for themes and independently reviewing themes to create what is referred to in the literature as 'thematic maps' (Braun and Wilkinson 2003). These maps offered a visual representation of the key themes and sub themes emerging from the data analysis.

Ethical Issues

This study was deemed to be an evaluation of the practice teaching programme rather than research and it was not necessary to seek ethical approval through the University Research Governance protocols (Ulster University, 2018). The evaluation was a formative and diagnostic feedback mechanism (Williams and Brennan 2004) to capture the trainee practice teacher's experiences of the programme and their perceptions on the dual role of gatekeeper and learner. The online survey was low impact and did not include interviews with respondents or contact with respondents considered vulnerable. The questions asked were not of a sensitive nature. Respondents were advised that it was not a mandatory requirement to complete the survey and participation was voluntary. Written consent was not sought as the return of the anonymous survey indicated the respondent's wish to participate in the evaluation aligned with ethical practice in service and module evaluations. Furthermore, the

online surveys were downloaded and stored securely within a password protected file accessed by the first author (McLaughlin 2007).

Limitations

This was a small scale qualitative study providing a ‘snap shot’ view of the perceptions of trainee practice teachers registered on the programme from September 2019 until July 2020. To this end, the results are context specific and offer an insight into trainee practice teachers’ perceptions of being both students (Master’s level) and gatekeepers in assessing whether undergraduate students (particularly in final year) were competent to join the social work workforce in Northern Ireland during a time of unprecedented crisis. Therefore the trainee practice teachers’ perceptions and experiences may not be representative of other practice teachers in the UK or indeed internationally. Thus this paper should be viewed as a Northern Ireland case study. Future work in this area would benefit from in depth interviews with trainee practice teachers at two distinct points, pre and post programme.

Results

The results of this evaluation of trainee practice teachers’ perceptions are presented in this section as a number of themes and sub themes.

Demographic Characteristics of Trainee Practice Teachers

The age range of the respondents was 25-54 years. The majority of trainee practice teachers who returned the online survey were employed within the Health and Social Care Trusts ($n=13$). The remaining respondents were employed across various sectors including voluntary, education, youth justice and independent.

Findings

The findings are presented below as a set of themes and sub themes. Firstly, the theme ‘assessing competence’ is presented and compartmentalised under specific headings including direct observations, service user feedback and

Table 1. Themes and sub themes

Themes	Sub themes
1. Assessing competence	Direct observations, service user feedback and supervision.
2. Experience as a student	Support from practice assessor, perceptions of learning and teaching, COVID 19 and stress.

supervision. Theme two relates to the respondents' perceptions of being a student and reflects on the support received from their practice assessor, their observations of learning and teaching, COVID 19 and stress.

Theme 1: Assessing competence of undergraduate social work students

The majority of respondents assessed their allocated student as competent at the point when placements were stood down after 53 days. This presented a range of challenges given that some had the responsibility of deciding whether a final year undergraduate student was competent and ready to enter the workforce as a newly qualified social worker.

Several respondents noted the importance of incremental assessment. One respondent highlighted the involvement of their practice assessor.

Respondent 1: I did not decide that X was passing on day 53. This was discussed with my practice assessor from the first pre-PLO meeting, and at every supervision, observation and conversation I had with my assessor.

One respondent who had a final year student who she assessed as not yet competent pointed to feelings of being under pressure.

Respondent 9: The pressure to complete a summative assessment report and hand in for 3.4.2020 following the placement termination on 18.3.2020 was extremely stressful and pressured. Combined with this, my assessment was challenged within the mid-point meeting by both the student and tutor. The meeting was conducted via telephone!

Direct Observations of Practice

Core to the ability to demonstrate competence as a developing social work practitioner is having direct practice observed by the practice teacher. This presents an opportunity to assess the student in 'real time' working with individuals and families, moreover, it creates a space to reach for feedback from service users on how they felt during the interaction, what they liked about the interaction with the student and what the student could improve upon for the duration of their placement. For all the respondents the opportunity to observe the student in practice was central to their assessment of competence (at this point) or not competent.

Respondent three noted:

I was fortunate that the student had completed two direct observations in which I assessed him to be competent. This along with formal and informal feedback from families and professionals further validated his competency.

Several others commented on how they made use of one direct observation in addition to other forms of assessment to decide if the student had demonstrated 'good enough' practice to pass their placement.

Respondent 22: *I had completed one direct observation. Although I had completed several supervision sessions. I liaised with other professionals the student had been working with. I also considered the guidance supplied to me regarding decision making around competency.*

Respondent 4: *We had completed one direct observation and mid-point, so this helped to show that the student was on track to pass the placement. The work I reviewed was competent and at the standard required.*

Another respondent commented on the use of informal observation:

Respondent 2: *Observations of practice. I had also acted as onsite with student and shared an office so was aware of his level of competence and skills throughout the PLO.*

Service user feedback

The involvement of service users, carers, experts by experience and survivors in social work education is a core component of the learning experience. After each direct observation the practice teacher is required to obtain feedback (if appropriate) on how the individual or family experienced working with the student. All of the respondents acknowledged the significance of service user feedback in the assessment of competence at first and final placement.

Respondent 6: *For me it was essential to obtain feedback from young people, and the student's ability to integrate and build relationships with young people they worked with.*

Respondent 20: *Working with people is at the heart of what we do. I needed to be sure that the families working with the student felt listened to.*

Two respondents noted the difficulties associated with placements being stood down with immediate effect and the impact this had:

Respondent 18: *With the placement ending suddenly it had a huge impact on the families. I felt this was unfair on the families who the student engaged with and equally on the student and I trying to complete our studies.*

Respondent 13: *I was unable to bring the placement to a suitable end, complete any further observations or give feedback following observation. Nor was I given the opportunity to speak to service users or focus on endings with the student.*

Supervision

As trainee practice teachers responsible for assessing the competence of undergraduate students on a professionally regulated programme, the mantle of gatekeeping is extremely daunting to the 'first timer'. Supervision is a central tenet of the practice learning experience where the dots are joined together by thoughtful curiosity, critical reflection and an understanding of

the application of theory to inform practice. Supervision is where ideas are tested and values challenged. The abrupt ending of placements impacted on the trainee practice teachers' experience of being an educational supervisor.

The comments in relation to supervision were wide ranging, with some respondents commenting on their plans for supervision with the student and others reflecting on the supervision and support they received from peers. Not all of the respondents regarded these experiences positively.

Some respondents acknowledged 'unfinished business' in relation to supervision:

Respondent 2: I had planned to use different tools for supervision in a graded manner to coincide with the student's growth in competency/capability, however this was not able to occur.

Respondent 4: I felt that the impact on the pandemic on my supervision experience was that I was beginning to feel confident that my practice was changing and that I was improving as a practice educator and then this was cut short.

Theme 2: Experience as a student

As students participating in the Practice Teaching programme they were supported in this first assessment of competence by their assigned practice assessor. The respondents were asked to score the support they received from their practice assessor on a Likert scale of 1-5, with 1 being 'poor' and 5 being 'very good'. 16 respondents out of 22 rated their support as either 'good' or 'very good'.

Two respondents reflected on the poor quality of support they received:

Respondent 12: The impact for me was not getting the continued supervision with my practice assessor, not having additional observations with them which would enable time to develop my skills and receive further feedback.

Respondent 8: My practice assessor did not make contact with me throughout this time either. That would have been helpful.

Learning and Teaching

A broad range of issues were identified in relation to the respondents' perceptions of teaching, feedback and preparing for the final written assignments.

One respondent reflected on the vast array of handbooks required and questioned if there was an alternative way:

Respondent 2: I feel there are too many handbooks which at times can feel overwhelming particularly when you need particular information. Would there be a better way of presenting the information, perhaps to reflect the stages of the placement from beginning to end?

Several respondents reflected on their experience of learning:

Respondent 8: *I worry that our class may not fully appreciate the complexity and dilemmas of the practice teaching role as this learning was cut short. We are doing this role, over and above that of our own social work role.*

Respondent 16: *I feel it is very possible to do all of the teaching online [next year] However there is a need for some form of discussion group e.g. Zoom or MS Teams so students can interact.*

Respondent 13 noted: *It can be difficult with a busy and stressful caseload ... not be able to 'ring fence' study days that are to be taken at home.*

Several specified the importance of feedback:

Respondent 21: *I was surprised how much I valued the formative feedback from our supervision videos, for me this is the one session that offered an excellent opportunity to learn and reflect within a smaller group.*

Respondent 20: *I have really missed the face to face learning sessions, as I enjoyed discussing things with colleagues and staff. This also really helped for the first assignment and I feel at a disadvantage for the second.*

Lastly two respondents reflected on the disparity between trainee practice teachers and final placement students:

Respondent 9: *I have been very puzzled as to why the social work students could be fast tracked on a degree programme, but the practice teaching students have had to continue to juggle the course on top of managing the social work response to Covid-19.*

Respondent 7: *I feel that my learning has been hindered by not having face to face sessions. If the students we supervised have been given a reduced work count, [for written assignments] we should too.*

COVID 19 and stress

The impact of the pandemic on the practice teaching students was immense. As full time social workers they were on the front line responding to the crisis, managing their own safety and that of their families and trying to complete a programme of study. In their qualitative comments there was a real sense of the pressures and stresses they experienced.

Several respondents noted the impact on their confidence:

Respondent 9: *Covid-19 had a significant impact on my learning and development and my ability to commit to the course, there was significant uncertainty and I was redeployed twice during this. As a result of the uncertainty personally and professionally I have struggled to maintain the study requirements and keep up to speed with the teaching.*

Respondent 5: *Not being able to finish the course properly has affected my confidence and I have considered dropping out, I am not confident I will be*

able to pass my final assignment and achieve my potential as a result of the disruption and upheaval.

One respondent commented on the need for innovation and creativity for the next cohort of trainee practice teachers:

Respondent 16: Going forward new practice teaching students will need to be looking at alternative methods of completing direct observations, the skills around completing a conference call direct observation or a face time direct observation are very different than face to face interaction.

Finally respondent one pointed to the fact that: *The whole experience just feels unfinished.*

Discussion

MacDermott and Campbell in their 2016 study of students' perceptions of voluntary sector placements comment that 'the influence of the student's placement experience weighs heavily on their sense of professional identity as a social worker' (2016, p. 44). The authors of this paper would question whether a similar narrative is true for the trainee practice teachers and their sense of identity in becoming a practice teacher. In this evaluation there is an acknowledgement that respondents did not get the 'complete' experience of being a practice teacher, the beginning, middle and ending of the learning process and role. The rapid pace of creatively and safely responding to an evolving and uncertain pandemic was experienced by social work practitioners worldwide. As Walter-McCabe (2020) asserts in a matter of weeks social workers across the global community had to completely change their working practices and service delivery models.

In this evaluation the majority of respondents found the cessation of face to face teaching disadvantageous to their experience as a student, highlighting the support from peers and the ability to ask questions of the lecturer as being central to their understanding and development. However, there was an openness to try new ways of learning with an acknowledgement that the video conferencing they used in practice could be a mechanism for hosting peer support and learning groups to foster their 'sense of belonging' and embed a learning community of practice (Wenger 1998). This resonates with the finding of Wilkerson et al. (2020) that the previous reluctance of social workers to use technology must be set aside, with a call to action to use technology as service provision adapts to remote delivery in a pandemic.

All of the respondents recognised the dual role they occupied as a gatekeeper to the profession and as a student learning to become a practice teacher. And yet there was a third role identified, that of the social worker, responding to the needs and risks of individuals and communities at a time of unprecedented crisis. Those who are accessing support from social services

are often economically disadvantaged with poverty acting as a significant barrier to inclusion (Department of Health 2018). Furthermore, with many people having to 'shield' this has had a huge impact on people experiencing loneliness and self-isolation and for many service users working with a social worker will have provided a connection to life outside their home (Van Bavel et al. 2020; Bolin and Kurtz 2018; Berg-Weger and Morley 2020). Shifting between and across these roles of educator-student-practitioner has understandably impacted their motivation and confidence as some of the respondents noted in their qualitative commentary that no dispensation was offered in terms of what was required of them e.g. reduced word count for final assignment.

Reflecting on the starting point for placement the final year social work students were on the cusp on entering the professional workforce at a time of great uncertainty. Their placement commenced in early January and the momentum of COVID 19 at that time was as viewed as a non-threat, an item of news about something happening at the other side of the world. As their placements progressed so too did the perceived threat of COVID 19 which rapidly became an active threat within local communities in Northern Ireland. For the trainee practice teachers conducting this assessment of competence was a huge responsibility and required reflection on several key questions based on their assessment and analysis of the students' practice at the point when placements were stood down at 53 days. Questions such as, on balance was this student ready and prepared to enter the professional workforce as a newly qualified social worker? Did this final year student have the self-belief that they were prepared and ready to practise in a pandemic? What specific learning needs must be identified to scaffold the student's post qualifying learning especially their Assessed Year in Employment? There was also a question trainee practice teachers needed to ask of themselves in their reflection on their learning journey: do I feel prepared and confident enough in my new role as a gatekeeper to decide whether this student has evidenced 'good enough' practice?

Surprisingly, power dynamics associated with the gatekeeping role did not feature in respondents' feedback. Robertson (2013) in her Canadian study with field educators, noted that some of the respondents pointed to the notion of a *hunch or a gut feeling* about suitability to progress to the next level of training or to qualify as a social worker with Robertson concluding that 'the gatekeeping role predominately falls to the field education component in social work' (p. 107). The assessment of student competence that results in a failed placement can be isolating and stressful for practice teachers, as identified by two respondents in our evaluation. Often this can be an emotionally charged time for everyone involved and the qualitative commentary provides some insight into the emotions, ideas and reactions (Fook and Gardener 2007) the trainee practice teachers were experiencing as practitioners and as students. Although the data in this paper does not provide sufficient depth to explore and identify how assessment impacted the 'winners and losers' of the

undergraduate student cohort in gaining access into the profession, previous research from Finch (2015) asserts that across the UK the number of students failing placements remains low. Certainly, the responses in this evaluation indicate that most competence decisions were made with the guidance, reassurance and support of the practice assessor.

In this evaluation the use of existing assessment tools has helped this cohort of practice teachers to make decisions on student competence, either to progress to the next academic year or to graduate and enter the workforce. The tools used to achieve this are our tried and tested repertoire, the social work standards matrix, competence differential statements and the plethora of policies and requirements as described in the Practice Learning Handbook (Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership 2020) and Practice Learning Standards (NISCC, 2020). However, the approaches for direct observations and the passing of placements that were outlined earlier in this paper will require modification as social work educators, practice teachers, placement providers, students and universities plan and risk assess the terrain for the next few rounds of allocations during the COVID 19 pandemic. This will require a reimagining of the status quo, looking at alternatives and additions to the 'traditional placement experience'. Azman et al. (2020) writing about their experience with Malaysian social work students are explicit in their assertion that 'there is no going back to "business as usual" virtual learning and teaching are here to stay' (p. 6).

Outcome of a Small Scale Evaluation

While preparing this evaluation the authors began to reflect and discuss the key learning points identified. We were struck by an important point made by one of the trainee practice teachers: *is there a better way of presenting information ... perhaps to reflect the stages of placement?* We considered how this could be developed creatively into a hybrid learning model for social work placements and a virtual learning environment to support ongoing assessment of a student's competence. Thus we created the 'Peer Learning Bubble Model' as a hybrid approach for use by practice teachers (while training and when qualified), students and tutors. The Model could be facilitated virtually should placements be stood down or untenable owing to the COVID 19 pandemic and to support students who are self-isolating at home or completing some placement days off site owing to agency protocols and safe staffing levels. See Figure 1 below for a diagrammatic representation of the model.

The Peer Learning Bubble Model is a virtual online learning hub with four distinct domains

1. Support
2. Learn
3. Participate

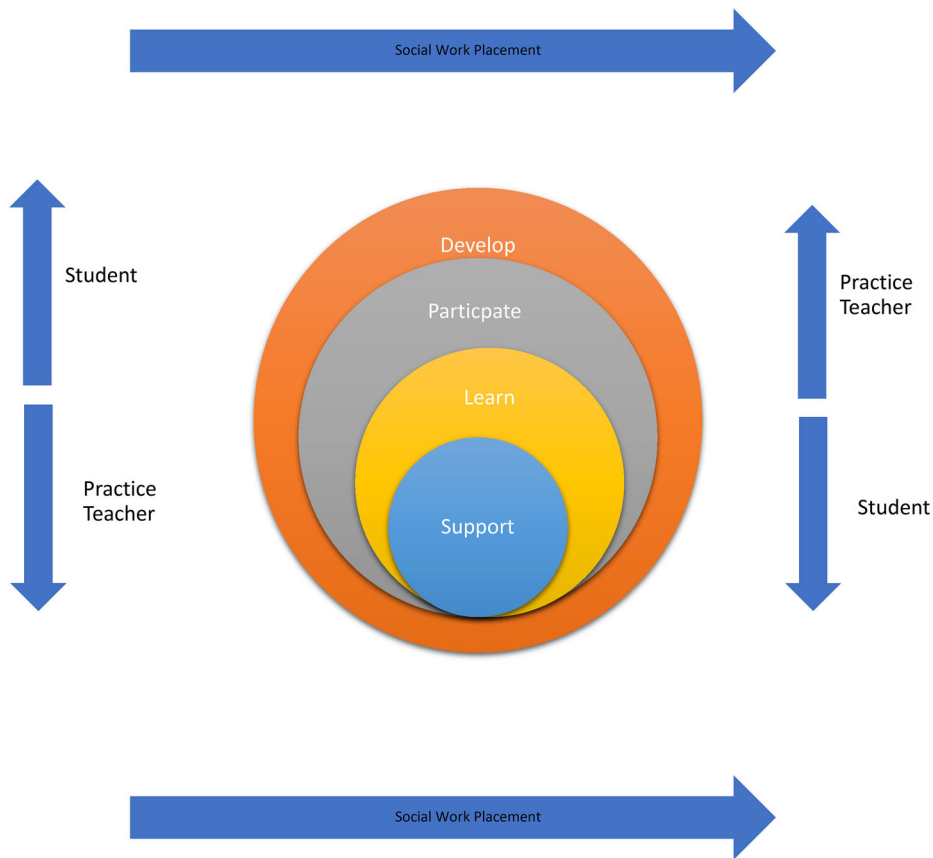


Figure 1. The peer learning bubble model.

4. Develop

1. Support: The ethos of the Peer Learning Bubble Model is to create a sense of belonging within an online community of practice (Wenger 1998). It is the foundation domain
2. Learn: E learning and access to webinars, podcasts and a range of digital resources e.g. digital storytelling from experts by experience to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience of others, the importance of community development in crisis recovery
3. Participate: Action learning tasks e.g. case studies, researching evidence informed practice, completing online presentations to peers, engaging in the use of feedback to feed-forward
4. Develop: Evidence how practice has developed. Ability to clearly articulate learning and how this applies to practice. Reflective practice, understanding power, inequalities and human rights, principles of social justice, ethics, reflective analysis of belonging to a community of practice.

The Peer Learning Bubble is intended for use with practice teachers (while training and when qualified), social work students and tutors. It offers flexibility and could be facilitated interchangeably by practice teachers and tutors, social work

students and practice teachers. The model could also be adopted by employers to support newly qualified social workers throughout their Assessed Year in Employment. The model presents learning and development opportunities to consolidate social work knowledge of theories, models and practice approaches which recognise the place of micro and macro level social work in rebuilding communities in the wake of an unprecedented crisis. This hybrid approach resonates with the Department of Health publication entitled the 'Purpose of Social Work: Improving and Safeguarding Social Wellbeing' (2017) which sets out explicitly the purpose of social work, the characteristics of effective practice within the Northern Ireland context and the ways in which social work impacts and improves social wellbeing. Furthermore, the authors assert that their Peer Learning Bubble model is transferable across subject disciplines including teaching, nursing and community development all of which require a placement component to the learning outcomes.

Recommendations for Practice

- Provide adequate resources to support student learning on placement. As a result of ongoing COVID 19 restrictions 'live' face to face observations of practice will remain difficult to facilitate. Placement providers and practice teachers must ensure that access to technology is available to facilitate direct observations and also ongoing contact with service users and families. Many students will be working from home and must have access to suitable hardware to support this and maintain confidentiality of service user information.
- Reduce the required number of placement days from 100 days to 70 days including reviewing the start/end dates for all placements. The Rules for the Approval of the Degree (2012, 6.4) give authority to the Social Care Council to, 'from time to time vary the Standards for Approval of the Degree'. It is important to note this should contingency plans be required around number of days on placement.
- Issue standardised guidance for social work placements on what is good enough/not good enough social work practice to evidence the 20 National Occupational Standards for Social Work.
- Extend the Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) from 12 months to 18 months as compensation for only 50% of placement being completed. During the AYE period, the social work graduates have a restricted case load enabling them to apply theory to practice and to critically reflect on their knowledge, skills and values. A central focus of the AYE process will be ensuring self-care to avoid the risk of burnout and compassion fatigue.

Summary

Coronavirus has had a significant impact on the provision of social work placements. As we continue to live with coronavirus in our communities the need

for social workers entering the workforce is increasing. To ensure a consistent approach to social work workforce development and planning, we need to reimagine how we can deliver social work placements during the difficult and unprecedented times ahead. Now is the time to demonstrate our professional creativity in identifying different ways of working and learning that will meet the QAA subject benchmarks (2019), and reassure the public that those entering the workforce are equipped with knowledge and skills to support individuals, families, groups and communities.

The authors assert that this paper contributes to the evolving debate on how to facilitate social work education in a time of unprecedented crisis and change. The findings presented in the study have important implications for social work education. The challenges of COVID 19 has required a reimagining of what is possible: the Peer Learning Bubble Model suggested here captures the zeitgeist of creativity, innovation and necessity of living, working and learning during the COVID 19 pandemic.

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