Are non-traditional social work placements second best learning opportunities for qualifying social work students?

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Abstract

This article reports on the evaluation of practice learning opportunities for student social workers within 'non-traditional' placements provided by a major children's charity in England, Scotland and Wales between 2010-12. The student social workers undertook a wellbeing role within the project and the research here reports on the charity's ability to provide a 12 week programme through the use of delivery partners. In particular the research highlights the experiences and perspectives of student social workers, project leaders and HEIs to meet the 6 key roles, and demonstrate working with the legal framework, risk awareness and management and assessment skills. The article also considers how the developments in England will impact upon such placements in the future and their implications for the project. Lastly, the article suggests that these placements are not second-best, but different and raises the more fundamental question as to whether it is becoming easier to practise social work in placements such as these as opposed to those in statutory social service placements.

Introduction

This article reports on the evaluation of a major children and young people's charity's provision of practice learning opportunities for social work students across England, Scotland and Wales between 2010-1012. Placements were provided in England Scotland and Wales, although the vast majority were in England. The evaluation builds on two previous smaller studies for the charity that have been reported elsewhere (Authors, 2012). This article focuses on the final phase of working with the charity to develop high quality social work placements and reflects the tri-national roll out of the scheme over a two-year period. The focus of this article is to consider whether the evaluation findings suggest that such placements can provide quality-learning opportunities, or whether we should consider them as second best. As this research was undertaken during the changes to social work education we also consider the implications of the social work reforms for such placement providers.

Background

Wayne et al. (2010) suggest that practice learning has become the 'signature pedagogy' in social work through which students learn what it means to become a social worker and where theory and practice intersect. Practice learning placements are thus of critical importance to the development of the

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social work profession. The charity offered what could be termed as 'non-traditional' placements during which students provided wellbeing support to 16-25 year old young people on their twelve-week personal development programme delivered though Delivery Partners in the public, voluntary and private sectors. The project's programme consisted of a residential week, community projects, and work placements. The young people taking part in the project included both males and females, who were neither in work nor in education, some had previous criminal records and/or had been in care and were viewed as being in danger of becoming socially excluded.

Such 'non-traditional' placements are often defined by what they are not, rather than what they are. The authors (Authors) have discussed elsewhere that the 'othering' of such placements can be seen as suggesting they are viewed as inferior and second best. This has been further reinforced by the English Social Work Reform Board's (SWRB) (2010) commitment to a final one hundred day placement where students will be expected to gain experience of statutory social work tasks and work alongside registered social workers.

This article reports on the charity's ability to provide suitable learning opportunities for social work students who undertook a specific role supporting young people's emotional wellbeing, identified as:

> The Charity aims to help young people build their emotional wellbeing by giving them opportunities to fulfil personal and social goals, and to ensure that support is available when they need it. This helps them to restore self-belief and confidence so that gradually their self-esteem increases and they are able to move forward. (Charity, undated accessed 28.02.2013)

Non-traditional placements

This research was carried out prior to the changes to social work education in England recommended by the Social Work Taskforce (2009) and Social Work Reform Board (2010). At the time of the research student social workers were expected to complete 200 days in practice. The arrangement of these days was determined by individual Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) resulting in programmes with 2, 3 and in a few cases 4 placements. This has changed to two placements, one of 70 and another of 100 days from September 2013.

There is a growing literature on 'non-traditional' social work placements. A 'non-traditional placement' can be defined as a placement setting where social work students are 'not surrounded by professionals named as "social worker" ' (Hughes, 2009, p.22). Such placements may have an alternative core business e.g the police Hek (2012) and Jasper et al. (2013), fire and rescue services (Authors, 2012), social care Billingham, (1999) or schools Parker et al. (2003); Gregson and Fielding (2009) and Collins (2010). As can be seen from the diversity of these placements it is not possible to claim that this study is fully representative of all non-traditional placements. However, all such placements have to be approved and audited by HEIs as suitable to provide students with the learning opportunities to enable them to

demonstrate social work skills, knowledge, values and meet National Occupational Standards (TOPPS, 2002).

The evidence suggests that these settings do provide valuable learning opportunities (Hek, 2012; Jasper et al. 2012 and Collins, 2010 typically providing more direct client contact (Parker et al., 2003; Authors, 2012, 2013). These placements often provide a greater opportunity to learn about the profession's value base where it is not assumed that it is the dominant ethical framework within the setting (Hek, 2012; Jasper et al. 2013 and Authors 2012, 2013). This results in the students having to explain and justify their value base to others e.g. the fire brigade who do necessarily have the same values, thus ensuring they have a clearer understanding of what their own value base is. However, there still remains a reported resistance amongst students to such placements as they believe their employment opportunities will be impacted upon negatively if they do not have a statutory local authority social services placement (Authors, 2012). This is against a context in which there has been a decreasing number of statutory placements, 59% in 2004-5 to 54% in 2009-10 (GSCC, 2012 p.30). This is a vicious cycle, with fewer statutory placements, the SWRB's (2010) exhortation for more quality statutory type placements and employers increasingly viewing a statutory placement as a pre-requisite for employment results in non-statutory, and in particular non-traditional placements, becoming viewed as inferior to statutory placements or at least reducing potential employment opportunities. It is tempting at this point to equate 'non-traditional' with 'non-social work', but this is obviously absurd as just because students are in a non-statutory placement without social workers it does not mean they cannot be practising social work. This issue is to be developed further in a forthcoming article.

In considering whether such placements should be considered as second best, this study draws upon the experiences of student social workers and the the perspectives of key stakeholders including project leaders, HEI placement staff, and the young people with whom the students worked on placement.

Work by Atherton (2008), King's College (2008) and Maclean and Caffrey (2009) identify the conditions for a quality placement, whether traditional or non-traditional as: planning and preparation for a student's arrival, planned induction, effective support, regular supervision, a skilled assessor and a commitment to the General Social Care Council Codes of Practice (GSCC 2010(now replaced by the Health and Care Profession's Council)).

Methodology
The methodology consisted of a mixed methods approach (Cresswell, 2007) to address the evaluation's objectives as set by the charity which were:
1) Examine the effectiveness of the implementation of the initiative.
2) What are the young person's experiences of the initiative, and in what ways does it bring about benefits for young people on the project?
3) In what ways does the initiative benefit student social workers?
4) How can the initiative be improved and what issues should be addressed to ensure its effective continuation in the future? (Authors, 2013 p.iii)

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A mixed methods approach was chosen as it allowed us to address the charity's objectives above but also allowed us to use tri-angulation to develop a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the experience of student social workers than previous 'non-traditional' placement research. The quantitative data allowed us to compare the perspectives of student social workers at the beginning and end of their placements; the experience of both student social workers and project leaders between the two cohorts to be and be to able to look at the experience of the student social workers and project leaders in relation to the same issues. The questionnaire results fed into and challenged the qualitative aspects of the research allowing us to gain a greater depth of understanding of these issues whilst also allowing us to include the perspective of the young people in the research whose voice would otherwise not be heard. The young people's experience of school had mostly been poor or disrupted and it would have been unrealistic to expect them to complete a questionnaire.

The research findings reported here are principally concerned with objectives 3 and 4. The research was approved by the University of (Authors) Research Ethics and Governance Committee (REP 10/137, 2010).

The research consisted of electronic surveys, focus groups and telephone interviews. The electronic survey contained closed, multiple-choice and open-ended questions and included sections on; preparation for placement, induction, the student's role on the project, support, supervision and assessment, learning opportunities and reflections on the placement. Surveys were distributed to of all of the student social workers and project leaders at the 301 placements supported by a student social worker. This included student social worker surveys to be completed at the beginning and end of their placements (see table 1), and by project leaders at the end of the placement (see table 2). A separate survey for HEIs placing these students covered similar areas and issues. The questions in the survey were cross-referenced between the different groups to allow comparative perspectives and analysis of the same issue where possible.

Focus groups were held with 22 student social workers and 46 young people. These focus groups were then followed up with telephone interviews for all stakeholder groups including 9 student social workers, 10 project leaders, 13 young people and 5 HEI staff. The student social worker interviews were conducted with cohort 1 students at, near, or following the end of their final placement. The young people's interviews were targeted for three and nine months after their 12-week course had been completed.

Data Analysis
In keeping with the previous research studies (Author's own) the data was analysed thematically using the constant comparative method (CCM) (Boeije, 2002) both across and between the various stakeholders. CCM requires a series of steps in which items of data were subject to internal comparison (open-coding), then comparison within each data set (axial coding) and then across data sets (triangulation). The focus was on similarities and differences

within and between the data sets and how these can be understood in relation to the study's aims and objectives.

The quantitative data from the survey's closed questions was examined and compared both between student social worker and between the initial and final survey. These were then compared with the focus group and interview data on student social workers, which like the open questions of the survey, had been analysed inductively. The two sets of data were then linked together to challenge previous conceptions and create new themes of the experience of non-traditional student social worker placements (Moran–Ellis et al., 2004). This data was then cross-matched and challenged with the data from the other sources, e.g. project leaders. Following several cycles of comparison and revisiting of the original data, no new insights were identified between the four researchers and it was accepted that data saturation had been achieved. At this stage the findings were re-checked to ensure that they reflected the data as provided by the research participants.

The initial survey was completed by 171 student social workers (56.8% of total student placements) with the final survey being completed by 115 student social workers (38.2% of total student placements). For the project leaders there were 139 surveys representing a 46.2% completion rate, although this may be an under estimate as some of the project leaders will have had student social workers in both cohorts. The final student social worker survey response rate is disappointing. Although this still represents a significant number of responses, it cannot be considered conclusive but when these results were integrated with those from the surveys of project leaders, HEIs and the focus groups (with student social workers and young people) and interviews (with individual young people, student social workers and project leaders) they provide a robust basis for the views expressed here. It should also be noted that respondents were not required to answer every question in the surveys and percentage response rates have been used in places to allow for greater comparison with the number of responses include in brackets.

For this article we have focussed on two of the major thematic areas identified to address the charity's aims and objectives for the research. These include student social worker expectations and experiences and organisational issues.

Student social worker expectations and experiences
In this section we report on how the placements met the practice learning requirements, whether the students made a difference to the young people in the project and what the students valued in the placements.

Meeting social work practice learning requirements
By the end of their training English social work students were expected to evidence their practice in relation to the National Occupational Standards across 6 key roles (TOPPS, 2002), although HEIs can determine which roles are covered in which placement. The survey required students and HEIs to consider whether sufficient learning opportunities would be available to meet

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each of the key roles (see table 3). Confidence ratings were developed by asking respondents to indicate on a scale between 1-10 (where 1 represented not confident at all, to 10, extremely confident) how confident they were in meeting the individual key roles.

At the beginning of their placement student social workers expressed a high level of confidence that all the key roles would be met. This expectation appears to be borne out, as the degree of confidence for all key roles had increased by the end of the placement. HEI staff were also confident that the project offered opportunities to meet the key roles (see table 3). In the follow up interviews two HEI respondents indicated that opportunities to meet the requirements of key roles 5 and 6 (accountability for own social work practice and demonstration of competence in social work practice) were not always obvious to students. They highlighted the importance of the role of the practice educator in identifying learning opportunities as; "anxious students can get concerned until the penny drops!" (HEI telephone interviewee).

Employers and policy makers have expressed concerns (Social Work Taskforce, 2009) about the competence of newly qualified social workers in relation to; working with the law, risk awareness, management and skills in assessment and the analysis of assessment information. These areas were therefore explored separately in the research. Here the picture was less positive, in that student social workers were less confident (using the same methodology) about the likelihood of acquiring these skills than about meeting the key roles (see table 4). In respect of working with legislation and undertaking formal assessments ratings went down in the final survey whilst the rating for working with risk showed a slight increase. Interestingly opportunities to learn about assessment and working with risk are rated more positively when expressed as key roles 1 and 4 ('prepare for and work with service users to assess their needs and circumstances' and 'manage risk to service users, self and colleagues') rather than when described as skills for statutory social work. Of particular concern was the low confidence rating for undertaking formal assessments. When this was explored further in the student focus groups and telephone interviews it became apparent that the issue here was with the term 'formal' assessment, which the student social workers interpreted as written assessments undertaken by statutory social workers. Although some student social workers used the Outcomes Star (Triangle Consulting 2009-2012) as an assessment tool, there was no mandatory approach and in response to this some social work students designed their own assessment tools. Many others were able to identify assessment as an on-going process and were able to describe how they developed skills in communication, questioning and building relationships.

> My assessment skills did develop in a very unexpected set of ways. I expected to use an assessment tool - instead I developed a way of doing complex assessments based on a set of internal tools... it was a great opportunity to communicate and hear the experiences of the young people who had been horribly damaged by their experiences...I learnt loads. (Student social worker, telephone interview)

HEI staff also noted that the student social workers did not always recognise that assessment was taking place again emphasising the importance of the role of the practice educator.

There were similar findings in respect of the students' understanding of the legal context in which the charity operates and the significance of the law, not only in defining statutory responsibilities but also in enabling young people to access services and receive their entitlements to benefits or housing. The importance of the role of the practice educator was highlighted as in the other 'non-traditional' student placement research (Hek, 2012, Jasper et al. 2013, Author's 2012, 2013). In the follow up interviews with the student social workers, many identified their practice educators as either being helpful in making links with the legislation or commented that they could have provided more guidance in this area.

Student social workers' involvement with the young people
The primary driver for the charity's provision of student placements was to improve the experience of the young people using their service by providing them with additional wellbeing support. The research team was required to evaluate the success of the project.

At the end of the placement social work students were asked to identify if they had helped any young people in the project. Forty eight per cent (n=48) of student social worker responses stated they had helped 4 or more young people complete the programme and 68% (n=68) indicated they had helped to improve the wellbeing of more than 4 young people in their project programme. Project leaders' views on the effectiveness of the student social workers were slightly less positive with 63.6% (n=64) of project leaders suggesting that the student social workers had only helped 1-3 young people stay on their project and only 15.9% (n=17) reporting that they had helped 4 or more. For improving emotional wellbeing the picture was similar, with only 56.8% (n=59) of project leaders stating that their student had helped more than 4 young people in this way, although another 34.6% (n=36) identified that the students had helped 1-3 young people. Whilst the student's estimation of their effectiveness is generally more positive than their project leaders, there is a clear message, that involving student social workers helps young people complete the programme and benefits their emotional wellbeing. Certainly, the young people backed this up, as one commented in a telephone interview:

> The student was a lot of help - my problems were with Probation so I had to attend. I had problems with my family and some ups and downs so one-to-one time with her was useful. She was a lot of help when I spoke to her –better than talking to my probation officer. The whole group went to her with their problems. (Young person 6 months interview)

When the young people in the focus groups were asked how their experience of the project could be improved most could not identify anything in particular, but the second most common thing mentioned was more frequent one-to-one time.

> The best thing about having a student social worker is having someone to talk to one-to-one. It calms me down when I need it. She notices when I come in and have had problems at home. (Young person focus group, cohort 1)

One unanticipated consequence of having student social workers, as volunteered by 3 project leaders in the survey, was that project leaders felt more able to recruit more young people with complex needs:

> In a team with 15, one-to-one time is difficult, but the student offers this; advocates and provides specialist support, for example, around bereavement, drug and alcohol misuse, housing and financial problems and relationship issues. I consider this at recruitment time – if I have a student we can provide the additional support needed by some of the young people. (Project leader interview)

Project leaders who provided responses to an open question (n=21) generally agreed that student social workers enhanced the young people's experience of the programme;

> The student social worker was an approachable alternative to uniformed staff, specialist knowledge of services provided an interesting balance and foil to disciplinary tendency to remove them due to their behaviour- that is, the voice saying to me 'but that's why we need to work with them'. (Project leader cohort 1)

What students valued on the placements

The interviews, focus groups and surveys all highlighted the importance that student social workers placed on building relationships with young people. Asked to comment on what they enjoyed most about the placements 67 out of 95 (70.5%) respondents highlighted some aspect of their direct involvement with young people. Twenty-eight mentioned 'working with young people', a further 20 mentioned the amount of contact time with young people and the other 19 cited their satisfaction at seeing the young people develop and progress throughout the experience improving in their confidence and self-esteem.

> Seeing each of the individuals grow and progress, the reflections around the camp fire on the residential when everyone was so open with each other, it was priceless and I felt very privileged to be part of it. (Student social worker final survey)

Organisational Issues

Having examined some of the evidence in relation to the potential for learning within these non-traditional placements, we now report on some of the key organisational factors influencing the quality of placements. Over the four years of involvement with student social workers, the charity has committed

significant resources to improving the experience for students and staff, as well as for the young people. The evaluation revealed a number of issues, including difficulties with student social worker starting dates, the distribution of student induction packs, the Mental Health First Aid Training and the extra pressures on programme leaders.

Placement start dates

A particular issue for student social workers and project leaders was the start date of placements. The project programme lasted for 60 days and for students to take full advantage of the opportunities they needed to have begun their placement at the start of the process. Information from the surveys suggest that this became more problematic between cohort 1 and 2 where the percentage starting 5 days after the project had begun had increased from 3.3% (n=2) to 20.5% (n=16). This is particularly important, as the first activity on the project is a residential experience, which for many of the student social workers was the placement highlight;

> Gaining hands on experience working with disadvantaged young people and trying to understand what barriers they face to achieving what they want to...... The challenges (both Project and Community) were great fun but the residential was a fantastic experience for both students and the staff alike. (Student social worker final survey)

As one project leader responded when asked how the project could be improved:

> Be present from the start to the end of the project. Halfway through a project makes it harder to build relationships, not impossible, but not ideal. (Project leader cohort 1)

The importance of students being present from the start was also raised as a key issue in one of the young people's focus groups. The young people were concerned that starting after the residential caused disruption and felt that the student had missed out on a significant shared learning activity. This was a particular problem due to the differing lengths of student placements 7.8% (n= 13) of which were under 60 days and could not thus provide students with sufficient days to complete a full project. This is further exacerbated due to the lack of congruence between the start dates of student placements and those of the projects. This is a situation which will become even more difficult in the future as these placements are more likely to be used by HEIs for the first 70 day placement for social work students thus providing very little manoeuvrability if they wish to experience a full project on placement. To achieve this there will need to be better coordination of project start dates with HEI placement periods across the year. This however, provides little flexibility in the event of sickness absence or holiday and has implications for placements which are only 3 or 4 days per week. As one project leader commented there needed to be more dialogue with HEIs to negotiate:

More flexible start dates for placements so that all placements are able to commence before a project starts meeting so that they get the best placement opportunity (project leader cohort 2)

Student Induction Pack

Prior to this research project the authors had helped the charity develop a Delivery Partner Student Induction Pack, outlining key organisational issues and examples of learning opportunities mapped against the Key Roles. This was intended to support students and project leaders before and during the placement. The project leaders viewed the handbook as: 'very clear, well written and gives good examples, (project leader, cohort 1)' with 82.5% (n=89) of respondents in both cohorts, who received it, rating it as either 'very useful' or 'useful' to them. It was thus of some concern that only 67.3% (n=35) of project leaders received it in 2010 reducing to 62.7% in 2011 (n=47). This suggests there has been some slippage with starting dates and induction packs requiring the charity to monitor these changes to ensure the placements are able to meet both student social worker requirements and young people's needs.

Mental Health First Aid training

In order to support the student social workers and the project leaders in delivering the wellbeing role the charity provided a two day Mental Health First Aid Training Programme (MHFA n.d.). Over both cohorts the number of student social workers who completed programme remained the same at 78% (n= 70 cohort 1 and 57 cohort 2). Project leaders who had also completed the course suggested that it was:

> …very relevant to what happens in the project and the types of situations that arise' (project leader cohort 1)

The Mental Health First Aid Training was also viewed as very useful by the student social workers:

> My experience of the young people that attended the project was that quite a few had multiple complex issues in their lives, such as temporary homelessness, substance misuse, family issues and financial issues. The MHFA (Mental Health First Aid Training) gave me a good starting point when dealing with the young people who were particularly emotionally low at times during the project. (student social worker final survey)

The biggest complaint about the programme was either that the students had undertaken it too late into their placement, or that they had not been able to attend. This was because either the programme was full, or other placement/university activities took priority over their attendance.

Pressures on project leaders

It would be wrong to assume that all the placements were a success. Motivated, enthusiastic students were regarded positively, but those who did not engage were seen as creating extra work for the project leaders:

> I was very disappointed in this particular student as in comparison to the last student she seemed quite disinterested and did not put much effort into the young people as a whole. (project leader cohort 2)

For project leaders the biggest challenge of social work student placements, as recorded in the surveys and interviews, was 'time', or more precisely the lack of time and the pressure of time constraints for additional meetings, supervision, paperwork and reviews. Students who were not committed to the project in these circumstances are viewed as an unwelcome burden, with three project leaders suggesting they should have more say in which students join their projects. This was further compounded where project leaders felt they were not receiving the level of support from the delivery partner or university. These concerns and suggestions about being involved with the recruitment of student social workers were identified as issues for the charity to address.

Limitations of the research

There were a number of limitations to this research. It would have been useful to have identified students by gender and race. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the students referred to the project were not representative of the overall student social work population; however it would have been useful to have collected data allowing us to prove or disprove this. The study could have been improved if we had been able to secure a higher number of HEI responses. We did re-circulate the survey four times to HEIs without success and in response conducted individual interviews with 5 HEIs to supplement the findings. Importantly, there is also the missing perspective of practice educators, we had hoped to address this by examining a sample of student placement reports, but due to difficulties with data protection and lack of comparability between HEIs we were not able to include the practice educator perspective.

It would also have been helpful to have obtained a higher percentage of student social worker responses especially with the follow up survey. We had anticipated this might be a problem and had also included the focus groups and telephone interviews to add greater depth to the study and to ameliorate some of the difficulties in achieving high response rates to electronic surveys.

Lastly, there were significant differences between the lengths of placement. This impacted upon the research in two ways, first, opportunities for student social workers to work with young people across a full project were impossible for some students. Secondly, those with a hundred days, or more, had significantly more time to meet the key roles and means we were not always comparing like with like. The change to either a 70 or 100 days placement in the future will make this easier to control and compare.

Discussion

In this section, we reflect on the charity's commitment to providing effective student social worker placements and the impact of these placements on the students, young people and project leaders. We begin by considering the likely impact of the changes in social work education for these placement opportunities.

The changing landscape of practice learning in England

Prior to completion of the research it became clear that in future such placements would be restricted in line with the proposed changes to social work education being introduced in September 2013. Managers of social work programmes in England have, or are, in the process of seeking university re-validation of their courses, approval by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) which replaced the General Social Care Council (GSCC) in 2012 and endorsement by The College of Social Work (TCSW). These changes impact not only on universities but all placement providers. The National Occupational Standards are being replaced with the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) (TCSW 2012). From Autumn 2013 social work programmes in England will only have two assessed placements, one of 70 days and a final placement of 100 days. The final placement requires students to gain experience of statutory social work tasks and to work alongside registered social workers. This is difficult for non-traditional placements to achieve as generally they do not engage in statutory work or employ social workers. It is thus likely that such placement providers, if they wish to continue to provide social work placements, will have to focus on the first 70 day placement. However, this project has demonstrated that such settings can provide valuable learning opportunities for student social workers.

This article has already demonstrated the commitment of the charity to provide quality learning opportunities through the introduction of the student handbook, the provision of Mental Health First Aid Training and the external evaluations of the proposed programme, with a view to exploring ways of improving the student and young people's experiences over the last 4 years. The charity is currently reviewing its handbook in the light of the move to the PCF and looking at mechanisms to avoid induction packs being given out late, or not at all.

It is also considering how it can ensure that processes are in place to cover a large number of delivery partners and HEIs to ensure as many students as possible begin their placements at the start of the project

From the perspective of the students the placements have been valued, they have met the practice learning criteria and provide an alternative version of social work that is beyond statutory work and in particular child protection.

> This placement has significantly improved my skills and awareness of social work roles. It has allowed me to identify some of the procedures involved when accessing services for the young people. I have gained an awareness of types of problems young people can face today,

identifying the causes and solutions. A fantastic placement. (student social worker, final survey)

Whilst the projects provided plenty of opportunities to develop groupwork skills the student social workers particularly valued the opportunities to develop one-to-one relationships with young people. One social work student interviewed shortly before qualifying noted that the belief that young people could be supported to change, a key feature of her project placement, contrasted sharply with her experience on a final statutory placement where there appeared to be more emphasis upon meeting deadlines and completing paperwork. Whilst these placements did not provide 'formal' assessment opportunities, the Mental Health First Aid Training raised students' awareness of assessment as an on-going process rather than a single event (Holland, 2011). Students also noted that, whilst risk management was not an explicit part of their role, they were identifying and responding to potential risk situations in their work with young people. These placements also opened up student values to greater scrutiny in settings where it could not be assumed that everyone shared the same value base. In these situations it is more likely that the student social worker's value base will be challenged and that they will have to be able to explain and defend their position. In doing so they are more likely to develop a deeper understanding of social work values and how these can be demonstrated in practice. All the above suggests that these placements with the requisite supports and safeguards present excellent opportunities for social work students to demonstrate the National Occupational Standards and potentially the new PCF (TCSW, 2012) and Standards of Proficiency (SOPs) as required by the new regulator, the HCPC (HCPC, 2012). It would thus be very useful to repeat this study once the new placement pattern is in operation and placements are being evaluated through the PCF and SOPs. As part of this it would also be interesting to look at the placements that are not completed and those where students are deemed to have failed the placement.

Conclusions

Contentiously, it could be argued that placements like this offer student social workers more opportunities to practise their social work skills than statutory placements. Munro's (2011) review of child protection critiqued children's social work practice in England as being overly dominated by a bureaucratic-instrumental approach, placing too much weight on proceduralised practice at the cost of building relationships and practising professional judgement. This critique can be viewed as the antithesis of good social work. Lavalette and Ioakimidis (2011, p.139) usefully identify a distinction between 'official' and 'popular' social work. 'Official' social work refers to those who practise social work with a combination of state recognised qualifications and are members of a profession that is often regulated by the state. 'Popular' social work on the other hand refers to a wider range of activities internationally undertaken by a broader set of workers including those engaging in social work activities such as social movement activity, political social work and welfare initiatives undertaken by people who may, or may not, be qualified as social workers.

Sharpe et al. (2011) remind us that whilst there is a national drive towards prioritising 'statutory 'placements there has also been a continuing shift towards a plurality of social service providers, partnership agreements and voluntary sector funding that has become increasingly aligned with government targets, for example in increasing adoptions. As such we should not assume that social work qualifying education, social work's 'signatory pedagogy (Wayne et al. 2010) exists merely to provide 'official social workers'. Social work, as this article has shown is more than the sum of practices within a statutory setting.

Bellinger (2010 p.2453) also makes the point that 'official' social work placements may offer rich learning opportunities this is a different level of statement from saying that; 'they are the only place where students can learn real social work' (italics in original). To do so would be to privilege a model of practice learning and the definition of social work as mistakenly co-terminus with statutory agency fieldwork. For Bellinger (2010), non-statutory placements offer opportunities to develop new possibilities for creative practice in comparison to the increasingly regulated statutory sector. Non-traditional placements, if properly planned with suitable materials, supervisors, practice educators and supported by HEIs do offer a quality practice learning experience that can be viewed as different from a statutory agency. To thus claim that these are second best is to miss the point that because something is different does not necessarily make it less valuable or worthwhile. In fact, for some of the student social workers the placement was not a second best experience, but was richly valued and encouraged them them to rethink their future employment plans. Indeed some of these students have since taken up employment as project leaders within the charity.

If we accept such placements are not second best it then becomes our responsibility to ensure that student social workers and statutory employers are challenged in considering such placements as second best and that the strengths of such placements are highlighted as much as their challenges. If we cannot do this such placements will always be caught in a vicious circle whereby students will favour statutory placements, as not to do so will have a detrimental impact upon their future employment prospects. Such a position not only neglects a potential source of other quality student placements but also risks social work becoming even more aligned with statutory social work and neglecting the opportunity to develop a more creative and less procedularised approach to practice. As Munro (2011) commented many of the most able front line social workers are leaving frontline practice to practise in the voluntary sector where they can spend more time directly with clients or that they are moving into management. This potentially raises the question whether it is becoming increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to practise social work as a social worker in English statutory social work services?

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