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A systematic review of research on social work practice with single fathers

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'Consideration of Practice Education within a Regional Teaching Partnership employing a Communities of Practice Lens'.

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Abstract

This paper on practice education within a regional Teaching Partnership emanated from requests to consider how to progress its role and remit. It offers analysis of practice education within this context may act as a starting point for exploring a broader understanding of practice education and its role in practice learning, supervision, recruitment and retention in England. This paper has materialised at a time of significant change, when the National Accreditation and Assessment System is anticipated and the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) and Practice Educator Professional Standards for Social Work (PEPS) are under review. It proposes an expanded role for practice education that could situate it as pivotal to promoting standards of supervision and cultures of learning within such changing contexts. A '*communities of practice*' lens and a framework based on Caspi's notions of structure, content and process are utilised to explore options for progress. This paper recognises that practice education, as both enterprise and system, is complex and messy and thus cautions against conceptualising it in simplistic terms. It concludes with suggestions to advance practice education and areas for further research. These are founded on establishing specialist practice educators and *communities of practice* within an overarching practice education consortium.

Introduction

This paper emanated from work on the role of practice education within a sizeable regional Teaching Partnership in England. The primary aim of this partnership is to create a regional platform where excellent social work education can support clear pathways for graduates and practitioners into local and sustained employment. This paper originally served the purpose of germinating thought, reflection and action on firstly how practice education could support and augment the Teaching Partnership's stated aim of developing a 'University at Work' model and secondly how the transcending of organisational boundaries to promote collective learning and collective practice improvement could be encouraged. Within the Teaching Partnership, six local authorities actively took part in a practice education scoping exercise to inform this study. For the purposes of this paper, these are coded LA1-LA6.

The topic of practice education is significant and extensive. Practice education is a vital feature of practice learning and part of a broader but related topic, continuous professional development in social work.

The practice component of a social work qualification is an essential part of learning to be a social worker. Practice learning can be considered as the medium through which theory and practice are integrated and where links between the field and the classroom can be realised (Domakin, 2015; Bellinger, 2010a). As Evans (1999) suggests, practice learning should be understood globally in terms of all learning for and from practice. It should be conceptualised as career-long in its nature and, as Nixon and Murr (2006) argue 'as embedded in continuing professional development as it is in the requirements for qualifying programmes' (p.798). This is the stance adopted by this paper.

Practice education, as a vital cog of such expansive practice learning, can be considered underused, when, if effectively supported, it can support deep and critically reflective learning within social work organisations from student through to experienced and advanced practitioner levels (Stone, 2016; Nixon and Murr, 2006). A range of scholars (Bogo et al 2002; Parker, 2007; Regehr et al, 2002) suggest that ongoing, stable and effective support, critically reflective and educative supervision, and forums for group and peer learning are critical to good practice education. These elements of practice learning and practice education informed the approach to this paper, and expediently aligned with the Teaching Partnership's key 'University at Work' model. This model aims to co-locate research, teaching and practice in the workplace in order to increase the collaboration and learning between frontline practice and academia.

Multiple approaches to practice learning and education have been implemented over the years (Shardlow and Doel, 2006). These include academic, apprenticeship, articulated, structured and competency-based models. It is unfortunate that there appears to have been negligible evaluation of the implemented approaches, meaning it is unclear as to which may be most effective or expedient.

There are a variety of approaches to practice, or 'field', learning and education internationally. In the US, 'field education' is often agency based as in England with the oversight of a practice supervisor. Similar concerns around the tensions between academia and practice, anti-oppressive practice and agency demands therefore present themselves. However, approaches in the US also include a more integrated model where students spend time at University reflecting upon placement experiences with designated academics during their placements (Preston et al, 2014). Within the Scandinavian context, practice learning is realised in a more integrated way through non-academic teaching centres; local annexes to universities, where academics and social workers are co-located with students. This has been developed on the principle that professional competence can only be gained through being immersed in the field (Satka & Karvinen, 1999). This paper will return to ideas of more integrated approaches to practice learning and education later.

The progression of approaches to practice learning has occurred within a social work education context in England of increased regulation, inspectorial and technical approaches and domination of managerialist and statutory social work agendas (Humphries, 1997; Plenty & Gower, 2013). Because of this range of approaches, there has not been a consistent or fixed approach to practice learning or education in social work. Instead, approaches have regularly changed and evolved (Parker, 2007) and clarity around roles, learning objectives and the role of knowledge, values and research within these endeavours has been lacking. Changes in practice learning and education, and the need for changes to the current approaches being used, were critical to this project.

As there are a variety of contemporary approaches to organising practice education within the UK and further afield, this paper will briefly outline the current English context. Practice education itself has gone through numerous changes within the English context, becoming more assessed and regulated over time. At the present time it forms part of a broader social work education programme where students typically undertake a three year undergraduate social work qualification or a two year postgraduate one. Both qualifications incorporate two long practice placements supported by a practice educator (PE) that combined form a cornerstone for learning and development (Narey, 2014). The PEPS set out requirements of PEs at two stages. PEs are expected to supervise, support learning and assess students on placement with them within England, supported by the university placing the student with them (Plenty & Gower, 2013).

'Primary themes of this paper'

This paper was intended as a starting point in exploring, and improving our understanding of, practice education within the Teaching Partnership. As highlighted, practice education is part of the broader issue of continuous professional development in social work. Some of the themes presented in this preliminary paper may therefore be informative for conceptualising the development of holistic learning cultures and reconceptualising practice leadership as an activity that is founded upon knowledge, values, research and experiential learning.

The primary parameters for this paper were that learning takes place within the context of wider practice, leadership through knowledge is critical to learning and that any practice education model selected needs to be reviewed and refined in accordance with the changing contexts of practice.

The paper begins by identifying the approach adopted by the author, it then discusses practice education's role in recruitment and promotion of learning cultures, before exploring models of practice education used within the Teaching Partnership. It identifies some key themes that have emerged and then poses questions for further research alongside suggestions for ways forward.

The approach to this paper

A focussed narrative literature review of practice education framed within the wider UK social work context was undertaken at the start of the project. This was supplemented by small scale scoping exercises and face to face interviews within the Teaching Partnership. These garnered views of significant parties within this context, explored the state of play of practice education, and situated and contextualised the information gained from the literature review. The data gathered was then examined through the theoretical lens of *'communities of practice'* and Caspi's concepts of structure, content and process. Thus this paper is not based on systematic direct data gathering and research, rather it constitutes a discussion and partial evaluation of practice education within one Teaching Partnership.

'The literature review'

The focussed narrative literature review was undertaken to gain an overview of the existing literature on practice education, recognise key themes and understand their relevance to practice education within the context of the Teaching Partnership (Grant & Booth, 2009). It utilised the specialised databases available at the University of Birmingham, but did not include 'grey' literature from the wider internet (Small, 2009).

The literature review employed the search terms 'practice education', 'practice learning', 'practice educator', 'social work student' and 'social work education'. Using these search terms a range of papers were considered credible, germane and authoritative in the field, based upon reviewing the research's methodology, design and the robustness and comprehensiveness of the research findings. The core themes within this selection of principally UK focussed papers were recognised as:

- lack of recognition for the status and value of practice education,
- lack of strategic approaches to harnessing the potential benefits of practice education,
- organisational context issues hampering practice education,
- lack of research into the experiences of PEs and what constitutes effective and valuable practice learning,

- but continuing examples of good practice in practice education that support holistic and deep learning , and
- perhaps most importantly, the need for an inclusive and holistic approach to supporting and promoting practice education within a broader expanse of continuing professional development and organisational learning cultures.

These themes are positioned within a contemporary context of innovation projects within England that are looking at developing different ways of working within children and families social work (DfE, 2014). A recent report by McNeish et al (2017), which was government funded, evaluated the first wave of innovation projects and examined children's social work systems. The report is titled *What have we learned about good social work systems and practice?*, and states that 'several of the evaluations highlight the importance of taking a multi-dimensional approach to skill development which includes training as part of an overall strategy incorporating a wide range of factors such as organisational culture, a shared practice framework, management expectations, peer and group supervision and coaching' (p. 27). This paper has adopted such a holistic view to learning and development, from the foundation of the focussed literature review.

Communities of Practice

This paper has used the concept of *'communities of practice'*, from the learning theory field, to conceptualise practice education in a holistic way. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) define a community of practice as 'a group of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly' (p. 22). They define key features of such communities as: regular sharing of information; members helping each other to solve problems and explore ideas; and these members being bound by the value they find in learning together. Within these communities knowledge is both social and dynamic. In addition, satisfaction is found through collective learning and knowledge creation, belonging to a motivating group and developing a common shared sense of professional identity (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002).

It can be understood that a community of practice has three crucial foundational elements. Firstly, identity is formed by a shared domain of interest (in this case practice education); secondly, members build constructive relationships that enable them to learn from each other; and thirdly, members are practitioners who develop a shared collection of resources, tools, experiences and problem-solving techniques to evolve high standards of shared practice (Wenger, 1998). It is through the development of these three pillars in parallel that *communities of practice* are fostered and practice is systematically improved (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). Wenger proposes that *communities of practice* provide openings for the learning of both individuals and smaller groups, and these openings can guide organisational progress, whilst giving structure to social learning within the organisation and promoting practitioner-led learning and peer-to-peer support (Wenger, 1998). It was always important to note in our project that developing and sustaining communities is neither simple nor straightforward; a notion that is applicable to all *communities of practice*.
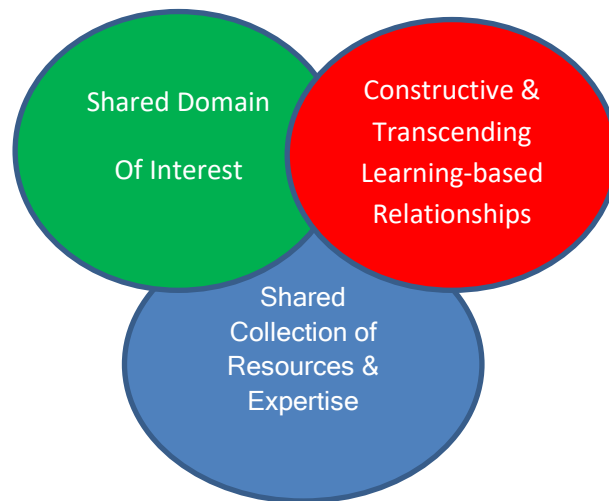
Diagram 1: Pillars of Communities of Practice

Based on this conceptualisation, early analysis suggested that a key aim of developing practice education within the Teaching Partnership should be to found and support dialogic processes that championed student and practitioner learning within and between all organisations (Parker, 2007). This suggestion will be revisited in more detail below in this paper.

Practice Education and Organisational Factors

'The Recruitment of Newly Qualified Social Workers'

In order to understand the local context of practice education data was requested from each local authority in the Teaching Partnership. This scoping exercise was undertaken to supplement and contextualise the information gained through the focussed literature review. A portion of this data described numbers of final placement students that have been subsequently employed by their placement authority as Newly Qualified Social Workers within the past two years.

The figures obtained from member local authorities revealed that in the period between 2015 and 2017, for instance, that over 50% of the students who had placements with LA1 gained employment; that in LA2 and LA3 recruitment drives led to five and 13 students gaining employment respectively; while in LA5 Children's Services that this number was 11.

It is important to note that only some of the local authorities within the Teaching Partnership returned data, so the figures above only portray an incomplete description. However, the data provided a snapshot of this important potential 'added value' of practice education to the recruitment of social

workers; an issue that has held particular relevance because of the significant recruitment and retention issues within the region.

The College of Social Work stipulated that students' final 100 day placements must prepare them for the statutory aspects of social work practice (TCSW, 2014), and within the Teaching Partnership there is a desire for these placements to progress to employment opportunities, with a desire for provision of enough statutory placements to enable statutory first and second placements for students. From the figures obtained, it can be clearly suggested that practice education contributes significantly to recruitment to social worker posts, be this through the students simply deciding to work within a familiar organisation or more multifaceted factors such as organisational socialisation, the learning experience or feeling supported as part of a learning organisation.

'Practice education, retention and the promotion of learning cultures'

Another central question for this project was to contemplate how to retain PEs and support their professional development and developmental aspirations. Vigoda (2003) suggests that increasing your knowledge and expertise in your chosen profession can often make the difference between staying with an organisation or leaving it. From this standpoint, a connection between practice education and retention can be conceptualised, linked to being part of an organisation with a learning culture. A workshop on practice education in the Teaching Partnership held at the start of this project, attended by PEs from member local authorities, raised strong thoughts and feelings that the PE role should have greater appreciation, and that managers should have better awareness of the importance of the PE role to local authorities. These points have raised questions for member authorities about how the role of the PE could be developed, rewarded and linked to career progression and focussed consideration on how to support practitioners to stay and flourish.

Lindsay and Walton (2000) have argued that many social work organisations have not planned strategically for the role of PE and standing of practice education or dedicated sufficient resources to realise its potential. This oversight leads to missed opportunities to raise standards of practice and develop cultures of learning within their organisations. Furthermore, the literature shows that practice education is often informal, overlooked in job descriptions and inconsistently supported (Waterhouse, McLagan & Murr, 2011). Research into the topic reveals many PEs undertake the training and engage in what can be a time and resource-consuming practice of supporting and assessing students to improve their own career opportunities (Parker and Whitfield, 2006; Bellinger, 2010b). Thus, it can be understood that if pathways for career advancement related to practice education are developed, PEs may be more likely to stay, take students and remain interested in the enterprise of practice education itself. Such a model was originally part of the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) structure, where at advanced level three interconnected pathways of advanced practitioner, social work manager and practice educator were established (BASW, 2017).

The time investment required of practice education is substantial, and can cause issues for PEs. In her research, Domakin (2015) found PEs were often concerned about the lack of workload relief and a sense of isolation from respective universities, which sometimes culminated in deep concerns about the quality of placements they could offer students. Although the author notes that Domakin's was a relatively small scale study, the issue of workload relief was raised consistently in the literature reviewed for this paper (Bellinger, 2010b; Parker & Whitfield, 2006; Waterhouse, McLagan & Murr, 2011; Domakin, 2015). This view was reinforced within the Teaching Partnership by attendees at the PE workshop consistently raising concerns about workload relief. The lack of workload relief can be problematic for the organisation as well as the practitioner because PEs are then not able to devote sufficient time and attention to fulfil the role. It was interesting to note that within the Teaching Partnership there were a significant number of non-practising PEs and PEs who were not regularly offering placements to students. This formulation therefore raised questions as to why PEs may not manage both employment for a local authority and a PE role, and how best to retain them.

This has all suggested a need for constructive partnership arrangements between member local authorities themselves and between member local authorities and the university, as well as a continuing need for the time poverty issues so common for PEs to be tackled consistently (otherwise support offers will not be taken up anyhow). Further, that ongoing and developing collaborative working arrangements between the university and member local authorities are needed to augment the support offered to PEs through their careers. The author has contended that for these strategic developments to be successful, they need to be mirrored by effective collaborative working on individual and team levels between staff of the corresponding organisations (Domakin, 2015). The author has also suggested that opportunities offered through blended approaches seem pertinent to achieving this (blended learning is defined as a combination of face-to-face and online learning activities).

Models of Practice Education within the Teaching Partnership

The lack of research focussing on practice learning has been identified by a number of authors, including Domakin (2015), Gibson (2012), Baum (2006) and Gambrill (2002). They specifically cite a lack of knowledge about PEs' experiences, what constitutes valuable and successful practice learning and social work students' views of practice learning. This makes it more difficult to understand how to maximise and promote the benefits and potential added value of practice education (Domakin, 2015), and in the author's opinion poses a significant challenge for pursuing a progressive practice learning agenda within the social work profession.

For the Teaching Partnership, the author analysed practice education in terms of structure, content and process (Caspi & Reid 2002; Parker, 2007) to encourage clarity in terms of thought and deed. To briefly define this framework, structure refers to how learning opportunities are arranged, for example single or group placements, on-site or off-site PEs, or team-based or more specialist practice education unit placements. Content refers to what is to be learnt, essentially the key aims and learning objectives of practice learning. The process of practice education refers to how learning and professional

development are supported and facilitated, for example through blended learning, direct or indirect teaching, shadowing or peer group learning opportunities.
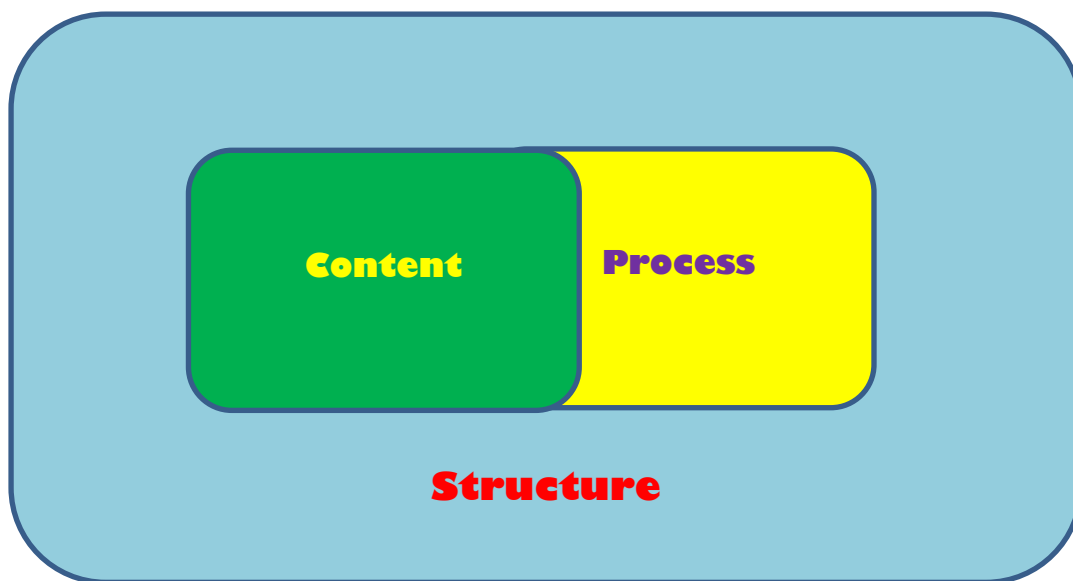

Diagram 2: Practice Education Framework

A scoping exercise of approaches showed that a range of different approaches were being used by member authorities, with different structures and processes evident. Some approaches appeared more coherent, established and effective than others. This paper explores two models highlighted as potential exemplars within the Teaching Partnership. These are LA3 Adults and Children's Services practice education model and the Specialist Practitioner for Education (SPED) model in LA1 Adult's Services. One of the paper's aims was to identify approaches to use across the Teaching Partnership and so a brief outline of each model is provided.

LA3's practice education model employs a designated workforce development team, which provides a clear structure for practice learning. This team includes a designated practice education lead working across both Adults and Children's Services, whose role incorporates important features that support a holistic approach to practice education and accessibility of support. The practice education lead individually engages the teams, recruiting and supporting PEs, and co-delivers the practice education training with colleagues from LA6, providing visibility across the organisation. A structured matching process for students and PES appears effective, while workload relief is created through placement students not holding cases, rather working on the caseload of the PE. While this seems to be a generally effective strategy for LA3, potential shortfalls of this adopted approach include a lack of variety of practice experiences for the student and the possibility for the PE's caseload to increase to accommodate work for the student.

It was found that LA3 has ongoing links with LA6 around practice education, through an informal arrangement of mutual support founded upon ongoing cooperative relationships between the respective learning leads in both organisations. As practice education training is delivered within the wider

continuous professional development framework, LA3 is able to monitor and develop structure, content and process, while linking practice education with career development. This framework is actively supported by the specific learning and development team.

The second model proposed for consideration was LA1 Adult's Services SPED model. This model was interesting and offered pointers for good practice, especially in terms of structures and a perception of organisational respect for the PE role. This model employs a specialist unit, including management, administrative support, a university link officer, and specialist practice educators (SPEDs). Although it does not encompass all of the fundamental elements of a community of practice, it clearly constitutes a group focussed upon a shared domain of interest and encourages sharing of expertise and knowledge.

Because the unit includes a range of roles, it provides clarity and pragmatism around some of the 'smaller' issues that can be troublesome and time-consuming for PEs, such as: induction programmes; equipment for students; and case allocations. SPEDs directly supervise and assess students, but also support other PEs within the organisation, allowing them to influence practice education learning content and processes. Workload relief for PEs includes a reduction of case allocation of 20% while students are on placement, which LA1 Adult's Services views as appropriate and manageable. This appeared to be a fruitful approach to workload relief, but with potential shortfalls for the wider Teaching Partnership being whether member local authorities felt in a position to commit to such a figure and how the 20% reduction could be ensured uniformly.

LA3	Both	LA1
PE Lead	Workload Relief	Administrative Support
Matching Process	Designated Team(s)	Focus on 'Smaller' Issues
Training & Visibility	Specialist PE Role(s)	Support for PEs
Informal Arrangement with LA6		University Link Officer

Key features of the two 'exemplar' practice education models

More broadly, the scoping exercise showed that practice education had inconsistent organisational support across the Teaching Partnership. Workload relief was almost unanimously identified as an issue, but it was recognised that there was also significant disparity between the support offered by different local authorities. For example, some authorities offered financial incentives for staff undertaking practice education; not all offered structured and coordinated support; and whilst a few authorities managed placement matching, supporting and teaching in combination, the majority did not.

Dialogue between all is critical, be it face to face or online

Given the range of information described in the above sections, it is useful to draw them together. Parker (2007) proposes constructive dialogue is needed between universities and social work agencies to

ensure a synergy between academic learning and practice-based learning for social work students. Similarly, Domakin (2015) found that PEs want significantly closer working relationships and more ongoing support from placement universities in more recent research, although it is to be noted that only a small number of PEs were consulted in her study. Although since the advent of the Teaching Partnership there has been an increase in attendees for both PE stage one and two courses; these developments have occurred within a context of divergent views around how practice education teaching should be delivered. Some staff from local authorities have proposed shortening the number of teaching days and holding modules within local authorities, while some university staff have expressed concerns about the potential impact on standards. The author has therefore advocated that further direct and constructive discussion would be beneficial to proactively address any disagreements. The author is hopeful they will fruitfully materialise to promote synergy and support.

It is recognised that the practice learning issues found within the Teaching Partnership are also found elsewhere. For example, in his review of social work education, Croisdale-Appleby (2014) stated concerns about the varying standards of practice education, and also advocated to raise the profile of practice education nationally. Thus it can be proposed that change is required nationally and the discussion that ensues may therefore be relevant more widely.

The author considers that, as within the region relationships between local authorities and the university are supported by the Teaching Partnership, the potential scope of constructive and productive dialogue between significant parties and potential for change is exciting. He proposes though that such developments need to be within a context of developing substantive and sustainable practice education *communities of practice* within a wider Teaching Partnership wide practice education consortium. Such a framework for constructive working relationships could more easily foster and support blended communication and learning, using a mixture of face-to-face and online resources, to support the operation of practice education within the region. The example of the University of Suffolk, where they have developed an online resource for sharing knowledge and developing networks for local PEs, named PENSW, could provide some pertinent ideas (Plenty, Dix & Barley, 2016). These developments and ideas remain nascent within the Teaching Partnership, but, due to their progressive nature, they are arguably relevant more widely.

Practice Education and the 'University at Work' model

The author considers that the Teaching Partnership's 'University at Work' model seems useful to support the establishment of recognised practice education *communities of practice* within the region. As mentioned earlier, this model aims to co-locate research, teaching and practice in the workplace. These practice education *communities of practice*, using Wenger's outline above, would include academic staff as core members alongside PEs and relevant practice supervisors and managers from member local authorities, with clear guidance from leadership that values practice education. Using this approach could improve the support of practice education, and would be likely to situate practice education and a 'learning culture' at the heart of developing high quality, informed and compassionate

social work practice in the region. This development should be influenced by the regional PSWs, with their role of acting as a bridge between frontline practice and strategic decision making.

Communities of Practice	'University at Work' Model
Shared domain of interest	Shared vision to improve practice through knowledge, expertise and values
Relationships that transcend organisational boundaries	Co-location of research, teaching and practice in the workplace
Development of resources, knowledge and expertise	Mutual learning and development for LAs and University through research and engagement

Central features of Communities of Practice and the 'University at Work' Model

So, how can we make genuine progress?

There are a number of ways to potentially improve practice eduaction and support for practice education within the Teaching Partnership that conceivably have relevance for other regions and areas also. These are founded upon the development of 'champions' of practice education organised through member authorities; specialist practice educators (SPEs), who would need to be experienced and committed practitioners. These champions would establish and maintain effective communities of practice in practice education and develop innovative ways forward for practice education. Such developments would be supported within a wider Teaching Partnership wide practice education consortium and coordinated by a regional 'practice education lead'. The ensuing section will thus be divided in accordance with the three central features of communities of practice.

'Shared domain of interest'

In order to make progress, effective communities of practice need to be established around the shared domain of practice education. This would not be a straightforward, simple, or easily achievable task. It would be essential to support such communities to enable knowledgeable and experienced PEs to share information, explore common issues and act as 'critical friends' across the Teaching Partnership (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). This is a challenge for PEs as well as their organisations. The challenge for organisations centres upon the notion that time and investment into PE roles correlates with students' quality of learning experiences (Bellinger 2010b). For PEs themselves, the NOPT (National Organisation for Practice Teaching) Code of Practice for Practice Educators states that 'practice teaching is an accountable, professional activity and practice educators should seek to review their needs annually' (p.12).

A holistic approach to the development of the role of SPEs would be advantageous, reflective of the need for a more holistic approach to the domain of practice education within the Teaching Partnership,

and perhaps more widely. This is a view given credence when reading Croisdale-Appleby's (2014) review of social education, which recommends that practice education in social work learns from the national pathway for practice education in the nursing profession. Thus, the holistic approach should be grounded in a wider continuous professional development framework including academic delivery, organisational improvement and workforce and labour planning. The linkages between these themes should be stimulated and a broadening of the role of PEs more generally could be the basis for this. The issue of time poverty in practice is pertinent for this role broadening to be achievable and thus organisational commitment should incorporate genuine commitment to freeing up time and space for PEs to focus upon developing the role.

This broadening would also add value to all member authorities (and if considered more widely all social work organisations) by strengthening their continuous professional development programmes. As such, PEs should be encouraged to provide leadership to shape organisational cultures that minimise or circumnavigate barriers to learning and develop existing strengths to promote effective intra- and inter-organisational learning (Thompson, 2006). Furthermore, they should be supported to start to champion and model practice leadership based not on managerialist foundations but knowledge, values, research consciousness and practice expertise.

In the author's opinion, organisational commitment to coaching and mentoring skills and knowledge for champions of practice education could be critical. Coaching and mentoring both focus upon supporting feelings of self-efficacy, openness to new ideas and lateral and challenging ways of thinking (Garvey, Stokes & Megginson, 2014). Broadening the organisational commitment to workplace learning would then provide understandings of how practitioners learn well and draw out learning opportunities from professional practice experiences (Thompson, 2006).

The models of good practice identified in this paper can arguably inform developments and contribute towards removing the central barriers to PEs staying and flourishing within member authorities, and may offer ideas more widely. Briefly, adopting a holistic approach to recruitment, support and training to encourage learning and the link s between career development and practice education as in LA3; being attentive to workload relief and looking to specific case reduction strategies for PEs; and LA1's dedicated SPED team model's focus upon the smaller (but often time-consuming) details of placements, such as induction programmes all offer food for thought.

From a university perspective, once such organisational changes are enacted to better support practice education, more effective support can arguably be enacted. Options could include enabling or providing practice education masterclasses, support sessions requested by member authorities and 'train the trainer' courses. If arranged, such learning events would enable selected practitioners to train other practice supervisors within their member authority in terms of skills and knowledge in facilitating practice learning, high quality reflective supervision and organisational learning cultures. It needs to be recognised that university workshops currently offered and organised are often poorly attended.

'Constructive and transcending learning-based relationships'

Organisational support must be considered essential to positive progress. Thompson (2006) argues that progressing (practice) education requires that organisations support ongoing learning to ensure the role is optimised. Similarly, SCIE (2003) suggest it is imperative that social work organisations develop an organisational-developmental perspective to practice learning; thus that practice education should be integrated into wider continuing professional development programmes and be aligned to staff progression. The development of SPEs and communities of practice fit with this perspective, focussing on developing organisational cultures of continuous learning.

The author has proposed that within the Teaching Partnership, one or more trailblazer local authorities in the area are identified. These trailblazers would commit to several strands of support: developing identified practitioners to reach the coaching and mentoring stage of practice education; developing agreements about how PEs will be effectively supported organisationally; and then support these PEs to act as SPEs. SPEs could offer routes for professional development that are practice-orientated and parallel to management, as advocated by Munro (2011) in her seminal review of child protection. SPEs could also promote an agenda of high quality practice education across the spectrum of learning beginning with student social workers, through the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment, and including continuous professional development programmes. Once established, these champions could offer leadership by developing active national practice education links, establishing and facilitating regional PE events, and instituting active relationships with the university.

SPEs could steer alignment between the current focus upon organisational practice frameworks and practice education, championing practitioner-led relevant personal development plans and professional trajectories founded on knowledge, research and professional expertise within the chosen organisational practice framework. This would support workers to have control in their own career pathways as well as the development of research-informed practice, theoretical thinking and organisational knowledge banks; what Eraut (2010) refers to as academic knowledge and skills. If practice frameworks, as proposed by writers such as Connolly (2007) and Stanley (2016), are to authentically link leadership activities with frontline practice through promoting key practice activities and core social work values, the alignment and integration of a practice education element is surely critical to such changes feeling less disorientating and anxiety-provoking for practitioners.

As with any new agenda, direction is needed. Strategic leadership around practice learning is therefore critical to provide a structure for this development; as a result, attention is required from senior managers to practice education, especially to drive forward clear relationships between practice education and career progression. As Thompson (2006) states 'how motivated individuals are to learn, how confident they are in learning, how encouraged they feel in learning all depend in large part on the organisation, its culture and how it is managed' (p.18).

Positive progress also requires genuine, open partnership arrangements between universities and local authorities, as well as ongoing input from universities into the support offered to PEs throughout their careers. This input should seek to coherently address the motivations, concerns and professional needs of PEs. Blended approaches appear to provide substantial opportunities to achieving collaborative ongoing relationships and support.

Furthermore, perhaps lessons can be learnt from abroad. In the US, students are encouraged through an integrated approach to field learning to engage in praxis between theory and practice, whereby students learn theory in the classroom, apply such concepts in practice, and then reflect back through discussions with other students and designated academics (Preston et al, 2014). Surely, such an approach could be employed for practice educators, where learning is supported through practice education courses and masterclasses, this learning is applied in practice, and communities of practice with academic leads provide the opportunities for critical reflection on such learning and experiences. Then standards of practice education can be arguably effectively fostered.

This clearly links to the need for all practice supervisors and managers to be able to develop the knowledge and skills to offer practitioners reflective, developmental and supportive supervision. Therefore, the author has proposed to the Teaching Partnership that a related issue requiring consideration is how to develop relationship-based, developmental and critically reflective supervision for all practice supervisors and managers, not just PEs. This requirement is specified within the Knowledge and Skills Statements (KSS). Statement 7 of the KSS for children and families practice supervisors is titled 'Emotionally Intelligent Practice Supervision', in terms of practice education perhaps best rephrased as 'mentalising-based practice education'. This statement encompasses reflective thinking, considering the impacts of high emotion and stress, and protecting practitioners from unnecessary bureaucratic stress (DfE, 2015); these are each, unquestionably, elements of critically reflective supervision. In the adults' field an analogous KSS is, it appears, being composed, and the author understands that it will similarly highlight the need for reflective strengths-based supervision for practitioners.

For the regional Teaching Partnership, the impetus for change gains momentum when considering two points in conjunction: first, the broad agreement of research into supervision in social work; and secondly the significant retention issues in the region. For instance, Dickinson and Perry (2002) found that workers who remained in child welfare rated their supervisor significantly higher in terms of supporting their welfare than those who left; while research by Maertz et al (2007) found that those who stayed in the profession rated their supervisors more highly for facilitating learning and promoting job enthusiasm. Furthermore, Landsman (2008) and Smith (2005) found that practitioners' retention decisions were associated with their perceptions of the emotional support in supervisory relationship and support received with stressful situations at work.

This various research and conceptual evidence clearly suggests links between support, supervision and retention, supporting the idea that it would indeed be useful to make changes to practice education within the Teaching Partnership to support supervision more widely. The author has advocated that SPEs could be central to developing an agenda of collaborative learning in member authorities, where all 'practice supervisors' have access to the knowledge and skills required for reflective, supportive and analytical supervision. Furthermore, that development of supervision skills, practice education skills and coaching and mentoring skills would need to become embedded in all local authorities' career progression structures.

It can be argued that this holistic approach to development and improvement is endorsed by McNeish et al's recent report into innovation projects in England, which as mentioned earlier advocates for holism and joined-up thinking in progressing learning and development in children and families' social work. Furthermore that such an approach could support the region to develop a coherent approach to change and improvement based on communal knowledge development, collective problem solving and collaborative learning cultures. It is timely to note that the government still intends to roll out the National Accreditation and Assessment System (McNicoll, 2017) and that there are current reviews of both the PCF and PEPS. Innovation seems required and timely to ensure high quality social work and practice education are maintained and built upon.

'Development of resources, knowledge and expertise'

Once established, it is important that PE communities of practice encourage coordinated tools, models and assets. This coordination would consequently improve the collaboration between PEs, and allow the region to investigate knowledge and gaps, as well as suggesting solutions to address issues (Wenger, 1998). Tools, resources, knowledge and information are often disconnected between respective social work organisations, even within the environment of regional networks such as the Teaching Partnership. The author has recommended to the Teaching Partnership that it would be beneficial if these valuable resources are amalgamated, managed, developed and made available to all through innovative blended approaches; that recognise that knowledge is dynamic and evolving. As mentioned, the University of Suffolk have developed an online resource, where knowledge and information can be shared. Their evaluation, though capturing only a small sample of views from PEs, yielded positive feedback in terms of how much it was used and the value placed on it by PEs (Plenty, Dix & Barley, 2016).

For social work to progress as a profession formal knowledge must be embedded through practice and experiential learning and sources of non-formal and situated learning must be supported. Research by Eraut (2010) found that over a wide range of professions 'informal' workplace activities accounted for between 70-90% of the research participants' learning. SPEs could arguably be influential in supporting this often untapped learning, promoting mutual accountability for learning and development for themselves, but also their fellow practitioners, both novice and experienced. The potential ways forward outlined above should integrate ideas of more distributed leadership, where there are increased

opportunities for SPEs to steer learning and professional development within and outside their agencies. Consequently, individual and organisational choices and actions can be more focussed upon practice learning and improvement.

The regional Teaching Partnership is collecting data about the numbers of active PEs who are able to offer placements for students, and student placement numbers. This data gathering could form one facet of a much clearer and more robust quality assurance framework for practice education; yearly practice education 'health checks', focussed upon quality as well as quantity. This would promote quality in both practice education as well as the wider workforce, because of the key role practice education fulfils in their development.

The author has proposed that the Teaching Partnership should consider formalising the validation of practice education as part of this process, because it is unclear whether all PEs in the region are at a sufficient standard. In order to be able to engage in developing a learning culture, they must contribute to learning and development that promotes high standards of practice, morale in the workforce and effectively bridges the gap between the classroom and frontline practice (Thompson, 2006). Furthermore, they must have the confidence and support to fail students when necessary, which as Finch and Schaub (2014) contend is a deeply emotive undertaking. This all requires contemporaneous knowledge, skills and evidence-based approaches to the task. Such ideas may be pertinent for other regions also.

The NOPT Code of Practice for Practice Educators offers useful ideas for validation. For example, it states that PEs should participate in degree programme activities, maintain appropriate records of their practice learning activities and contribute to the collation of practice learning statistics.

So which model of training may be the best fit?

The author has suggested that it would be useful to have establishment of a clear region-wide practice education vision, commitment of senior leaders and incentives for PEs themselves to progress this agenda. It is for the Teaching Partnership to openly discuss and decide upon what model of practice education it wants to take forward, agree standards and aims, and establish consistent organisational support for PEs and practice education more generally. However, the author is hopeful that the primary themes of this paper may be relevant to other regions, social work organisations and practitioners, at least as food for thought.

There are several different models of practice education training that could be adopted within such a supportive region-wide organisational framework:

- the 'university-based' model, as currently offered by the author's university;

- a 'hybrid' model where budding PEs have less time at university, rather a mix of university attendance and learning within their Local Authority scaffolded by a university;
- a 'train the trainer' model where specific practitioners are trained and effectively supported to be able to train budding PEs in informed and valuable ways;
- a blended learning model where face-to-face and online options are best utilised to uphold standards.

When utilising a *communities of practice* lens, and resonating with the 'University at Work' model, learning is conceptualised as taking place not only in classrooms, but also in the wider practice, professional and organisational contexts (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). This concept should arguably be used to design the future model to be adopted. In addition, it is important to remember that learning must continuously evolve and that any initial model selected will need to be reviewed and refined in accordance with the changing wider practice, professional and organisational contexts that frame all professional activity. This paper notes that there is no requirement within the PEPs for PE training to be university accredited, but that such an approach is advocated by BASW and the National Organisation for Practice Teaching (NOPT) (TCSW, 2013; NOPT, 2013). The author proposes that rigorously evaluated practice education should be the desired way forward (for any region).

'Or a real change of direction?'

The 'University at Work' model's focus on co-locating research, teaching and practice in the workplace could of course be taken one step further. In the US, consideration is being given to redesigning the whole approach to practice learning. This would involve practice educators and academics shifting from responsibility for individual students in individual agencies to a community and issue focussed approach, where the system of practice education becomes community based and acts as a focus for dialogue, collaboration, and action in marginalised communities (Preston et al, 2014; George, Silver & Preston, 2013). In Scandinavia, non-academic teaching centres, where academics work locally with social workers, complement university education (Satka & Karvinen, 1999). Although radical, this could arguably relink social work education with its roots of anti-oppressive practice and community engagement, and relink the classroom with the field. Perhaps blended approaches and communities of practice could combine to then really come into their own?

'Further areas for research'

To effectively push this agenda forward, further evaluation and research is needed, which should consider initial organisational changes and later changes to the delivery of practice education training. This paper proposes that this research consider a number of issues:

- To examine the knowledge, skills, experience and values requisite for specialist practice educators, to see if they are able to provide appropriate support for PEs, students and continuous professional development in organisations.

- To further consider how practice education fits within the wider continuous professional development framework, including academic delivery, organisational improvement and workforce and labour planning. This should include how practice education can play a more active role and how linkages between these strands can be fostered and stimulated.

- To research the needs and requirements of practice educator *communities of practice* to function and flourish.

- To explore options for establishing regional practice education leads and regional practice education consortiums.

- To further investigate the organisational support of practice education, and scrutinise whether it is adequate with specific reference to workload relief, financial support, direct placement support and continuing learning.

- To scrutinise the options for a scheme of practice educator validation and to actively explore the possibilities for an annual 'health check'.

- To further research the numbers of students on placement with member authorities who progress to employment. This area of research should focus on how many final placement students later gain permanent employment in regional member authorities, rather than just the local authority where they had their final placement. This should provide a more comprehensive picture of practice education and pinpoint benefits.

- To further explore the role of practice education and learning in continuous professional development programmes.

- To critically explore the potential role for practice education in the implementation and development of practice frameworks, a current live issue for social work.

- Linked to this, to give attention to using these suggested developments in practice education as a model for developing and championing leadership based not on managerialist foundations but knowledge, values, research consciousness and practice expertise.

- To consider a radical departure to community based practice education and a genuine move to actively linking the classroom with the field in more integrated ways. Therefore, the models highlighted in this paper from the US and Scandinavia to be further explored and analysed.

Conclusion

This paper sought to provide a starting point for a deeper exploration and study of practice education in a large regional Teaching Partnership. As such, it was emphasised from its onset within the Teaching Partnership itself that more questions would be posed than answers provided; these questions have been posed in the paper. The author hopes that these questions can also generate discussion within other contexts and regions.

There are clearly a number of limitations to this paper and its transferability to other social work contexts, including other Teaching Partnerships. This is notwithstanding that the author views its focus as an important area for discussion and innovation. These include that firstly it discusses practice education

within one regional teaching partnership, and the issues evident may not be representative for the wider social work profession in the UK. Secondly, it covers the first phase of a programme of change for practice education, so changes and developments remain incomplete, and questions must be asked about dependability. Thirdly, this paper is not based on systematic direct data gathering and research, rather it constitutes a discussion and partial evaluation of practice education within one Teaching Partnership. Having stated this, it does aim to contribute to the knowledge base of practice education within social work and discussion about its future directions.

In addition to the questions posed in this paper, it has made suggestions for potential 'next steps' for practice education within a regional Teaching Partnership that may be relevant to other contexts, supported by a range of evidence. These are predicated on the idea that practice education and its support need to change, and must evolve to provide the elements essential to its delivery, as outlined in the introduction to this paper, using writers such as Bogo et al (2002), Parker (2007) and Regehr et al (2002). These essential elements are: ongoing, stable and effective support; critically reflective supervision; forums for group learning; and promoting the integration of research and theory in practice. If effective PE *communities of practice* are championed, core members will be able to effectively support others from a practice orientation, understanding the needs of fellow practitioners within a framework of supportive *communities of practice* contained within a practice education consortium attentive to practice education structure, content and process.

Such positive developments could constitute firm foundations for the broadening of the practice education role, including in how practice frameworks are implemented, developed and most importantly inclusive of all practitioners, their skills and knowledge. This would authentically link frontline practice with strategic aims in grounded and collaborative ways. The IFSW definition of social work states that social work should be promoting social change and the empowerment of people, based on principles of social justice, human rights and collective responsibility (IFSW, 2014). The author conceives learning, development and practice leadership in social work that can offer compassion, care and creativity can only be achieved through knowledge, values and research-mindedness being effectively supported in the workplace. Practice education can and should play a significant role in this.

There seems to be a prime and potentially time-limited opportunity to experiment while Teaching Partnerships exist, in the form of authorities committing to the idea of developing specialist practice educators. This development could support practice learning through all stages of career development, to find ways forward that build a long term vision and coherent model of high-quality, creative and innovative practice education. Cogent PE *communities of practice* supported within regional practice education consortiums with clear strategic leadership could allow for the mitigation of formal local authority structures to promote sustainable, high-quality and inventive practice learning that transcends traditional boundaries and associated obstacles. The shape of future practice education is not predestined and opportunities for transformation are apparent.

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