

# Group learning on social work placements

Trevor Lindsay<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract:* In the UK, as in most other countries, social work student learning is a combination of a college based education and placement practice (practicum). There is nothing unusual in practice teachers working with social work students in groups. What is rather surprising is that, in spite of the approach having been accepted for many years, it has attracted relatively little interest as a research topic. However, the benefits of groups for learning are well established and discussion on groupwork models of student learning in practice is to be found in the literature of other helping professions, notably counselling, psychotherapy, nursing and occupational therapy. It is also well established in the literature on staff supervision. This article reviews some of the literature on group learning and supervision and presents the findings of a research project which examined the experience of students and practice teachers engaged in group supervision on placement. While a small number of students had some reservations about their experience, feedback from students and practice teachers was very positive overall. The findings of the study are used to suggest guidance for good practice in this area.

*Keywords:* Group, practice, learning, social work, students, teachers.

1. Lecturer in Social Work

*Address for correspondence:* Room MD114, School of Sociology and Applied Social Studies, University of Ulster, Magee campus, Londonderry, BT48 7JL.  
ft.lindsay@ulster.ac.uk

## **Background**

In the UK, as in most countries, student social workers are educated on courses which combine mainly academic, college based learning with practice learning based in social work agencies. In the UK the field supervisor is a Practice Teacher, qualified and accredited by the regulatory body and employed either by the agency or a consortium. Often practice teachers find that they have more than one student to supervise and in these circumstances it is not surprising that the teacher, at times, will see the students together in groups. What is surprising is that, in spite of the approach having been accepted practice for many years, it has attracted relatively little interest as a research topic. Until recently Sales and Navarre (1970) remained the most frequently quoted research on the use of groups in practice learning. More recently three small scale studies have been conducted (Bogo et al., 2004; Davis, 2002; Walter and Young, 1999). Extensive electronic searches uncover only a few other journal articles, (for example Bamford and McVicker, 1999; Arkin et al, 1999). Indeed Shardlow and Doel (1996) in their valuable book on practice learning make only fleeting reference. Nevertheless, there is more than enough elsewhere in the literature to inform practice teachers who have an interest in group learning. Much has been written on groupwork as a method of working with people. The benefits of groups for learning generally and in social work education in particular, are well established and discussion on group approaches to student learning in practice is to be found in the literature of other helping professions, notably counselling, psychotherapy, nursing and occupational therapy (Rosenthal, 1999; Powles, 2000; Mason, 1999; Prieto, 1996; Borders, 1991; Ellis and Douce, 1994; Hillerbrand, 1989; Arvidsson et al., 2001).

This article reviews some of the literature on group learning and supervision and attempts to add to the knowledge of group learning in social work practice through a study of the experience of students and practice teachers engaged in the activity in Northern Ireland.

### Group work in education

Jaques (2000) demonstrates how small group discussion helps students to express themselves in the language of the subject, to establish a closer relationship with their teacher, to develop skills in listening, presenting ideas, arguing a case and working as a member of a team. Most importantly, he contends, it provides the opportunity for people to monitor their own learning and so gain self-direction and independence in their studies. Drawing on a range of theories and strategies, he illustrates how the benefits of groupwork can be employed to enhance learning. Students' learning benefits from close and frequent contact with their teachers. They learn better when engaged cooperatively with other students. Their learning is greatly enhanced when they are actively involved, when they are given prompt feedback and when they are presented with a variety of ways of acquiring knowledge. Problem based learning, self and peer assessment, peer tutoring and self and peer monitoring are examples of *metacognitive* learning which involves thinking beyond the immediate knowledge or skills. Students who are able to think beyond what is given, develop deeper understanding and learn more lastingly (p.52). In a review of learning research Jaques (2000, p.53) highlights that:

Deep, holistic, relativistic students are more likely to prefer the openness of small discussion groups to the more formal, distant relationships of highly structured lecture courses .... A mixture of formal lectures, small group work, individual study and project work may be the best for the majority of students.

Abercrombie (1983) demonstrated that students learned more from being able to compare their judgements with those of their peers than from those of their teacher and Nichol (1997, cited in Jaques, 2000, p.53) argues that in group learning situations students are less likely to experience personal failure and more likely to develop an increased sense of responsibility and self efficacy.

### Groupwork in social work education

Similar ideas underpin the Enquiry and Action Learning (EAL) approach, developed at the Social Work Department of Bristol University. The key concepts of the approach are problem based learning and student autonomy in learning. Problem based learning, according to Burgess and Jackson (1990), facilitates the integration of academic and practice learning, helps students to develop skills in problem solving and increases motivation to learn. It also moves students from being passive to active learners, helps them to develop independent and critical thinking and results in higher levels of attainment. Taylor (1996) sees learning in groups as being a core element of EAL. It recognises and validates the skills, knowledge and ability held by all the students and acknowledges the mutual benefits that arise from the sharing of these. It also provides an environment in which students can learn the skills of working in interdependent relationships, thereby preparing them for practice in teamwork. Further, she argues, working in groups provides students with an experience of power, which occurs through collective identity and collaborative working and mirrors the process of working collectively as agents of change in practice.

Shulman (1987), in an article that focuses primarily on the use and misuse of process in the teaching of groupwork practice, highlights a number of 'mutual aid' processes that occur in the classroom. The tendency of students to help each other can be harnessed, he argues, to advantage in any classroom. Mutual aid processes include situations where students share knowledge, deal effectively with taboo areas, provide each other with emotional support, discover mutuality of feelings, doubts, worries etc., solve problems and rehearse solutions and act collectively to make demands or challenge the instructor.

Bamford and McVicker (1999) summarise some of the literature on the use of groups in social work education and argue that the approach has been insufficiently exploited. O'Dee (1995) in a discussion of small group seminars, argues that in these situations students develop skills in critical reflection as a balance against a prevailing technical approach and so are better equipped to

consider values issues. However she is concerned that in the existing economic climate, where the expected ratio of students to tutors is increasing, the approach is under threat and that this will adversely affect the emotional aspects of learning.

### **Group supervision**

One of the richest sources of material relevant to this study is the literature on the group supervision of staff. Practice teaching has obvious parallels with the supervision of qualified social workers and, of course, there are many similarities between group supervision of staff and group practice learning for students. Kadushin first identified the advantages and disadvantages of group supervision of staff in 1976 and has since refined this work many times (Kadushin, 1976; Kadushin and Harkness, 2002). Brown and Bourne (1996) identify similar advantages and disadvantages. Some of the advantages of group supervision identified coincide with the mutual aid benefits of groups in the classroom discussed by Shulman (1987) and to which reference is made above.

However, Kadushin and Harkness (2002) add to the list. They argue that the method is simultaneously both economic and capable of a wider variety of learning techniques and strategies. It helps with team building and professional identity. It makes supervision more effective since the supervisor and the supervisee are able to experience each other in a different type of relationship. The group supervision process allows for the splitting of roles, which in the individual situation would have to remain with the supervisor. The supervisor may be able to find support from the group in attempting to help a member to moderate behaviour and can use the norms of the group to move it in a positive direction. In group supervision the individual can become less dependent on the supervisor moving through a phase of dependence on peers to one with greater dependence on self. Lastly, group supervision provides opportunities for students to learn about each other's cultural and ethnic backgrounds and therefore allows exposure to challenges of stereotypes and biases. Consequently it has a contribution to make in the development of awareness of

oppression and modification of discriminatory attitudes.

The authors also identify a number of difficulties with the approach. A major difficulty lies in meeting individual needs, the group conference necessarily being directed towards the more general needs of the group. Consequently there may be a danger of it being less focused, structured and relevant than individual supervision. There also is potential for rivalry and competition and a danger of destructive and negative feedback from peers. Alternatively group cohesion can become so well developed that it stifles individual creativity. All these factors can make the facilitation of the group a difficult task and the supervisor, therefore, needs well developed skills in managing group situations, which past experience and training may not have provided.

#### **Group supervision in practice learning**

Hillerbrand (1989) provides useful insight into how cognitive psychology can help us to understand why group supervision may enhance learning. Skill acquisition is improved, he suggests, when it takes place in the presence of other students rather than in the presence of 'experts'. Skills are increased through a student's verbalisation of his/her cognitive processes in the presence of other students. The student must verbalise these processes in order to receive feedback. The students then become models of the verbalisation of cognitive processes for each other. Hillerbrand argues that experts, for example practice teachers, are poor reporters of their cognitive processes. They execute these skills covertly and so are poor at giving post hoc descriptions of their actual processes. Instead they tend to substitute less useful *re-interpretations* of the cognitive process. Students find recall and consequently verbalisation much easier as the cognitive processes involved in working with service users are less well established and therefore much more overt. Consequently, they provide better models. Additionally, a number of other advantages emerge. For example, students, being unfamiliar with the specialised vocabulary of social work, are more likely to use language which is understandable and accessible to other students. They are also

better at picking up the non-verbal cues that other students use to indicate confusion. These advantages can be capitalised upon through practice group learning.

### **Group learning in social work practice**

Various writers discuss college based and faculty led seminars and while this learning experience seems to differ in some significant ways from practice based learning groups it can provide some useful insights. Mary and Herse, (1992), for example, conducted a study which found that both students and faculty in these situations valued the benefits of 'professional support' and the 'exploration of values, beliefs, attitudes, competencies', while just a third thought that the integration of theory with practice was an important benefit. Arkin et al (1999) give an account of a social work education programme where students are offered group supervision in relation to individual casework in their second year and in relation to group and community field work in their final year. The programme is designed to take account of anticipated formative, working and ending stages of group development. This programme, they argue, provides a comprehensive framework, in which the group experience provides balance, support and self-confidence at the individual level, combined with mutual help, group solidarity and responsibility at the level of the group.

There have been three recent empirical studies of group supervision in social work practice learning. Walter and Young (1999) conducted a small qualitative study, involving interview of 12 students who had experienced a combination of individual and group supervision. They found that the combined model helped students make the transition from case manager to clinician as they moved from a problem solving approach to one that was more empathic and reflective. They developed a better understanding of the relationship between the client's history and current functioning. The group supervision element of the learning process was of particular value in developing the students' ability to relate theory to practice. Through the experience of other students presenting work they were freer of pressures to come up with the 'correct' theoretical perspective.

Davis (2002) also conducted a qualitative investigation of combined individual and group supervision, this time involving six students. She found that the students in this approach were able to learn to trust peers and supervisors sufficiently to be able to expose their worries about their level of competence and to express private negative reactions to clients that they perceived as unacceptable. Through this they were able to become more self-aware and develop a better understanding of how they could use themselves purposefully with clients. As a consequence, they were able to obtain better quality information from families and therefore assess and engage with them more effectively.

Bogo et al. (2004) in another small study, utilising qualitative interviewing of 18 students who had experienced group supervision as the primary method in practice learning, identified a number of factors that had bearing on the students' ability to benefit from learning in the group. Students came with very different levels of professional competence, including ability as a group member, and had differing expectations of the group and of each other. Consequently it was possible to identify a number of supervisor behaviours which facilitated learning through the development of trust, openness, sharing and risk taking. These were the modelling of expected behaviour by the supervisor, particularly risk taking and provision of feedback, intervening to promote group norms and facilitating group interaction, for example by open communication. Learning was compromised where there was insufficient trust and safety in the group for students to expose their practice fully and the skill of the supervisor in bringing about this learning environment was crucial. The sample in the study was drawn from a cohort of students that consisted entirely of females and an important finding arose from this fact. It is commonly thought that groups develop through the resolution of conflict, becoming more trusting and cohesive in the process (Schutz, 1958; Tuckman, 1965). The experience of this group did not follow this pattern. Rather, it seemed that in this all-female group, the group needed to acquire a sense of trust and safety before it could move on to deal with group conflict. This supported similar findings by Schiller (1995, 1997, cited in Bogo et al, 2004) that groups comprised solely of women do not follow



a development pattern where group cohesion and intimacy arises out of the resolution of group conflict. Instead conflict becomes more easily managed once an atmosphere, characterised by a sense of trust and a sense of safety, has been established. The capacity of the group to deal with conflict is an important factor in the ability of members to challenge authority and each other. Since the gender make up of social work courses is predominantly female, the role of the supervisor in promoting trust and cohesion in the group becomes even more significant.

The skill of the supervisor as a group facilitator appears as a recurring theme in the literature on group learning but allowing for this, it seems clear, from a wide range of literature, that group learning generally has many potential advantages. Research into group learning specifically in relation to the social work practicum is at a beginning stage. This study aimed to add to existing knowledge, especially in relation to the experience of students and practice teachers in Northern Ireland.

## **The study**

This study was funded by a grant from the Social Work and Policy Teaching and Learning Support Network, which during 2002/3 funded projects designed to help promote the use of effective learning, teaching and assessment activities in social policy and social work. The study aimed to investigate group learning on social work placements in Northern Ireland.

A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was used. Prior to 2004, the University of Ulster, at its campus in Derry Londonderry, provided qualifying social work education for 25 undergraduate and 40 postgraduate students each year. This has since increased to 95 undergraduate places with the introduction of a graduate threshold for all qualifying social work education and training throughout the UK. Students complete two periods of practice. Placements are assessed by a portfolio of evidence drawn up by the student, which includes both the student's and the practice teacher's evaluation of the student's performance. In both 2002 and 2003 the students returning from placement were

asked to complete a ten-point questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered to a convenient sample of all students attending a debriefing session immediately following placement. The students were advised of the funding and purpose of the research and completed the questionnaire anonymously and voluntarily. The questionnaire elicited quantitative information concerning on which course the students were enrolled, whether they had experienced group learning on their placement and, if so, the frequency and duration of the session. Those who had had this experience proceeded to a set of qualitative questions dealing with what they perceived to be the advantages and disadvantages of the group learning experience and whether they thought there had been situations that had occurred in the group that might have been dealt with more appropriately individually. Conversely, all students were to identify any situation that had taken place in individual supervision that they considered might have been better managed in a group.

The data collected and analysed from the 2002 questionnaires was used to inform a pilot group-learning project that took place at a local practice learning centre in the first part of the following year. Simultaneously, a further two situations were identified where students were being provided with group learning on placement. This provided a total of three different practice-learning situations, which varied between statutory and voluntary settings and with different combinations of practice teachers and numbers of students. Each of the five practice teachers involved was interviewed during the course of the placement. All the students (11) involved in the three placement situations were interviewed, after they were deemed to have passed the placement, either in the last week or by phone after the placement had ended. All interviews followed a semi-structured format. The interviews with the students again centred on what they perceived to be the advantages and drawbacks of the approach, but in greater detail. The interviews with the practice teachers covered similar ground but also included questions concerning their rationale for the method, the content and structure of the groups, and what they considered to be the most important issues raised by the approach. The preliminary findings were presented at three seminars where

practice teachers brought their own experience to bear upon the findings. The data collected and analysed from these interviews, together with the data from the 2003 questionnaires was used to inform a second pilot project in the autumn of 2003, involving the same two practice teachers as originally and another three students.

The quantitative data from the questionnaires was analysed manually. The qualitative data was transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. The data resulting was scrutinised, condensed, focused and simplified, a process described by Miles and Hubberman (1994) as 'data reduction'. This process produced a number of themes and sub-themes, which are now presented.

## **Findings**

### **Questionnaires**

The questionnaires provided both quantitative and qualitative data.

#### *Quantitative data*

Over the two years 102 students returned questionnaires. Of these 38 reported having experienced group supervision and seven had experienced it on both placements. Group supervision had taken place on an average of 3.4 occasions during the placement, the frequency ranging between once and six times. The average length of time for a session was 91 minutes, ranging from as little as 30 minutes to as much as 160 minutes. Students, overall, found group learning a positive experience. Only three students reported that they had not found the experience useful. Of these two said that it was too short (30 minutes) and the other gave no explanation.

#### *Qualitative data*

It was possible to categorise the answers the students gave to the qualitative items in the questionnaire. The tables below indicate the frequency of each response. First students were asked to indicate what they had found beneficial about group supervision (Table 1).

Table 1  
Main benefits cited as arising from group supervision

N=38	frequency	%
Support from peers	20	53
Learning from others experiences	15	39
Learning from others' viewpoints, sharing ideas, problem solving	13	34
Comparing progress	7	18
Empowering	2	5
Groupwork/teamwork skills	2	5
Safeguards for the student and the practice teacher	1	3
Total	60	

It will be noted that support of peers was the most frequently reported benefit, closely followed by the related benefit of being able to learn from other's experience, ideas and opinions. However group supervision was not an entirely positive experience for all students. Students were asked what disadvantages they felt being supervised in a group had for them.

Table 2 shows that although a much greater range of perceived disadvantages were reported there were fewer responses to the question in total and in fact 16 of the 38 students could think of no disadvantages. Nevertheless a particular theme emerges of some students feeling uncomfortable in the group setting – feeling intimidated, inferior, under criticism etc.

Students were asked next to identify situations that arose in group supervision that they felt might have been better managed in an individual session. This question produced only a few responses, in fact from just six (16%) of the students (Table 3).

Conversely all students were asked to consider situations in individual supervision that might have been better managed in a group situation. This provoked a greater response with 33 (32%) of the students giving an answer (Table 4).

Both students who had and those who had not experienced group supervision indicated that there were issues in individual supervision that they would have preferred to have had dealt with in a group. By far the greatest proportion of students responding

Table 2  
Disadvantages experienced

N=38	frequency	%
Difficulty in catering for students in a range of placement settings: too general, irrelevant material	7	18
Not having enough individual attention	5	13
Being criticised in the group or compared (unfavourably) with other students	3	8
Intimidating atmosphere	3	8
Feeling inferior to students at a more advanced level on the programme	2	5
Service user confidentiality	2	5
Not doing as well as other students	1	3
Power issues with the practice teacher	1	3
Imbalance in students' contributions	1	3
Not specified	2	5
Total	27	
No disadvantages	16	

to the question felt that they had missed the opportunity to share ideas with other students. It was rather surprising that hearing about other students' experiences was only mentioned once and that being supported by other students was not seen as important to the whole group, as it was to those who had actually experienced it.

## Interviews

### *Student perspective*

The findings from the interviews with the students in the main confirmed the findings from the questionnaires but the detail contained in them provided some additional insights. Although the majority of students experienced group supervision as a positive experience, three of the six students in one of the groups found the experience intimidating

Table 3  
Issues that would have been better managed in individual supervision

N=38	frequency	%
Sensitive issues regarding a service user	2	5
Personal issues	1	3
Learning about values	1	3
Receiving critical feedback	1	3
Issues relating specifically to placement	1	3
None	32	84

Table 4  
Issues that would have been better managed in group supervision

N=38	frequency	%
Learning from others, viewpoints, sharing ideas, problem solving (total)	25	25
Portfolio construction	9	9
Anti-oppressive and anti-sectarian practice	7	7
Relating theory to practice	5	5
Other	4	4
Support from peers	6	6
Comparing progress	6	6
Empowering	2	2
Learning from others' experiences	1	1
Groupwork/teamwork skills	1	1
None'	69	68

*There was no individual supervision initially and sometimes I felt scared and stupid. I didn't know who was my practice teacher. It depends on how comfortable you are in groups and it did stretch you but in the beginning I dreaded it.*

This improved over time and two of the students felt that overall the advantages outweighed this disadvantage. The other student stated that she would have preferred not to have had group supervision at all:

*I felt it was quite intimidating in relation to power. I found the practice teacher style quite threatening and it took away from individual supervision .... You felt you were on the spot in relation to knowledge and felt inadequate.*

### **Peer support**

Once again the main benefit perceived by students was that of support from peers. Students can find the practice element a particularly stressful part of their social work education. They are faced with new challenges, are often isolated from their friends, especially in rural Northern Ireland, and are continually under assessment. In these circumstances it helps to know that you are not alone.

*Say you were ever feeling you couldn't do it ... everyone else was in the same boat so that made you feel a lot more comfortable.*

*There was the social aspect as well. You could talk about your frustrations and maybe relax a bit and get an idea about broader stuff.*

Students reported that, in addition to the opportunity to meet their peers and share experiences, worries and concerns at each session, group supervision could provide them with a support system throughout the placement. As a consequence of group supervision they formed closer relationships with their peers which they could then access for support, if need be, on a daily basis, by making contact by telephone or e-mail. The students considered this type of day-to-day support to be especially important when there were no qualified staff members around to ask for advice, or where they felt they would look stupid if they asked the practice teacher.

### **Opportunities for learning**

Although in two centres students were engaged in work with different types of service user groups, this did not take from the learning experience. In fact, as in the questionnaires, students pointed to the benefits of being exposed to people who were experiencing a different type of placement and making sense of

theory from another perspective. Being able to discuss ideas and underpinning theory enhanced understanding:

*It was good for letting you know that you were on the right track, like when you would say something and maybe somebody else agreed or they said the same thing or similar and you knew you were right.*

In particular, opportunities to try out thinking on anti-oppressive practice were highlighted:

*I thought it was good in relation to stigma. You could get a better idea of the client perspective. You had more support and were not as threatened on that sort of topic. It wasn't directed at you as an individual. There was safety in numbers.*

This student notes the role of the practice teacher in providing a safe learning environment. The need for the practice teacher to have well developed group facilitation skills was raised by a number of students, especially in relation to pre-planning decisions, for example regarding group size and composition. One final year student recounted her anxiety about having previously been in a group where she felt over-awed by students who were ahead of her in the course:

*(the practice teacher) had second years in the same session as us and they were .... doing presentations on overhead projectors, saying what theory they were using and all, and I was going 'Oh shit'. I just dreaded it every week it came around.*

## **Interviews: Practice teacher perspective**

### ***Educational rationale***

Although the detail of approach adopted by the practice teachers differed from site to site, the rationale they gave for group supervision was consistently educational and was in keeping with the literature on the advantages of group supervision for deeper learning.



*It was more about 'We all have something to bring, so let's put our minds together' .... other people bring other aspects that I wouldn't have thought of. Also then people can challenge each other .... They took it far further than I would ever have dreamt of doing.*

The advantages identified by the practice teachers were consistent with those summarised earlier. The practice teachers identified only two disadvantages. The first, the inevitable difficulty of providing for individual need has been discussed earlier. The practice teachers had some success in managing individual need in the group setting:

*It's not that you can't work with an individual in the group. At first it's not always that easy to see but often in dealing with what one person is saying you are able to draw out learning for everybody else, or even you can show them ways of dealing with one without losing the others.*

but there were limitations

*The problem comes when a student is raising stuff that is really just between you as the practice teacher and them as a student and there is no way you can deal with it in the group. It wouldn't be fair to them or the other ones.*

The second was a more practical difficulty and was in part related to the system of competence-based assessment being used in the UK, where students needed to be regularly producing written evidence of their competence in practice throughout the placement:

*It is much harder to keep a rhythm of work going. With individual supervision you can set the student some work, .... one week, and then you can let them have feedback on it the next. So you tend to lose control over the process of evidence production.*

In addition to perceived advantages and disadvantages, there were a number of other common themes:

#### ***Safe learning environment***

All the practice teachers stressed the importance of providing a safe learning environment. However, some practice teachers

were aware that, nevertheless, some of the students found the experience of group supervision uncomfortable, even frightening. The practice teachers had given considerable thought to this. Of particular concern was the balance between students being challenged and feeling comfortable.

*So certainly they are saying 'this is causing us discomfort' but what we need to distinguish is 'Is it causing you discomfort because it allows us to put you under the spotlight and see what's going on .... or is it causing you discomfort because this .... is being unhelpful?*

However, other practice teachers took the view that students could only be challenged productively once a safe environment had been achieved.

*There should not be anything inherently anxiety provoking about the setting you are creating. People learn best when they feel challenged but safe.*

The practice teachers had considered a number of likely reasons for the student anxiety and had thought of possible ways of helping students to feel safe, for example by being careful not to aim the content of the sessions too high, limiting the number in the group to three or four, always starting the placement with individual supervision and only introducing group supervision when the students had settled and formed a working relationship with the practice teacher. Bogo (1993) discusses the importance of the student/practice teacher relationship and identifies four important elements: emotional support, autonomy, evaluation and cognitive structure. Student satisfaction is positively associated with a relationship that is characterised as warm, understanding, open, accepting, respectful and trustworthy.

#### ***Designing a programme of group supervision***

At each centre the practice teachers had devised similar programmes. All practice teachers reported that they included individual supervision as well as group supervision. They felt that this was necessary, so that students could receive feedback on

their individual work. Initially at one centre arrangements were made for the students individually to have a brief, time limited, advice session in addition to group supervision if the student felt it essential. However, as time went on, the practice teachers built in more time at the beginning of each group session for students to raise issues that were troubling them and this resulted in them rarely needing individual time.

At the pilot project and one other centre group supervision took place fortnightly, while at the third it was once a month following the induction period. However, these practice teachers also saw merit in a more frequent programme, particularly so that the groups could benefit from group processes and a system of fortnightly group supervision alternating with fortnightly individual supervision emerged as the ideal model.

All the practice teachers had devised a topic based programme which had a central role in group supervision sessions. Topics varied to some extent between the centres and according to the practice orientation of the setting. Although the sessions in each case were organised around a topic, all the practice teachers explained that they arranged this to keep didactic teaching to a minimum, so as to encourage active learning. At one centre they found that as they became more skilled in using the group supervision method they were able to rely on the topic to a much lesser extent. The pilot centre, which provided the greatest of variety of placements, found that the orientation of sessions had to be more general. There, topics were divided into two main themes. One theme dealt with practical issues such as the supervision relationship, preparation for a mid-placement meeting with the tutor and the production and organisation of evidence of competence. The other theme was concerned with how particular theory, for example in relation to communication and engagement, principles of assessment and issues of power and oppression, related to practice in the different settings. Students learn about theory through hearing how peers apply it in an unfamiliar practice situation, as well as thinking about how it might apply to the one in which they find themselves. By facilitating students in applying theory to practice in the different settings the practice teachers felt they were able to take full advantage of the diversity

of student experience and so satisfy individual student need and group need simultaneously.

### *Co-facilitation*

In the two cases where practice teachers were working together, they spoke of how they had developed their co-working relationship. At one centre this was something which had occurred, almost organically, over time. At the pilot project the practice teachers had taken a more strategic approach. As a first step they followed the planning schedule suggested by Hodge (1985), answering together a number of questions in which they checked with each other on issues such as their preferred style of facilitation, their perception of the aims and objectives of the placement, the means of obtaining them and their co-facilitation relationship. They felt that the fact that they differed in gender, nationality and religious tradition could have considerable learning benefits for the students but only if they themselves had first discussed and resolved any areas of potential conflict. Both sets of practice teachers who were in co-working relationships built in time for reflection, evaluation, the airing of feelings and planning the next session.

## **Discussion**

Comparatively little has been written specifically on the subject of group supervision and learning on social work placements and the few recent studies are either descriptive (Arkin et al, 1999; Mary and Herse, 1992; Tabathi and Mamasela, 2001; Tebb et al., 1996) or are empirical studies limited by smallness of scale. (Bogo et al, 2004; Davis, 2002; Walter and Young, 1999). This study is also limited by smallness of scale. Further it is limited by having drawn only on the students from one educational institution in Northern Ireland and there are dangers, therefore, in generalising too far on the basis of the findings. Nevertheless, opportunities were taken to discuss the findings with large groups of practice teachers from throughout the province who take students from all the institutions and it could be argued that the findings do have

application to other similar groups of students and contexts in other areas. Attempts were made to conduct group interviews of the students but these did not take place for a number of practical reasons. It would have been interesting to have interviewed the students in their placement groups, as this may have produced a fuller picture. Additional data may also have been available had the students been interviewed during the course of their placements but it was felt that they might have been inhibited by the fact that they were still under assessment. The study did have advantages in that it was based on a survey of 102 students in addition to interviews of 14, and was further triangulated by interview of five practice teachers.

In this study the opportunity to give and receive peer support was the benefit of group supervision most frequently cited by those who had experienced it. Given the significance of this benefit for students it seems too important to leave it to chance and it would seem prudent for practice teachers to build this into any group supervision programme. The provision of an entirely separate opportunity, complete with a facilitator, might be the ideal, since it makes a clear distinction between support and assessment. On the other hand, skilled practice teachers, in all settings, regularly provide their students with excellent models on how to deal with the issue of authority at the same time as providing support, which the students can, in turn, apply effectively in their work with service users. This applies equally in groups as it does in individual supervision. Students also report benefit from opportunities to hear of other's experiences and to be able to share ideas about how to deal with problems and other situations. In this way they experience a different learning experience, only available through working together on a problem. To a more limited extent opportunities to make comparisons of progress were important to students. All the centres included space in their programmes for students to share in this way and again this would appear to be best practice.

The disadvantages of group supervision, as identified by students, tended to be diverse, but could be divided into two main groups. Firstly there appeared to be the almost inevitable difficulty of addressing the individual needs of students without

running the risk of focussing on issues which were not relevant to others. The practice teachers in this study were acutely aware of this difficulty and were sufficiently skilled to find ways to find generalities in situations which initially appeared to be of concern to only one group member. Balancing individual and group need is a difficulty inherent in all groupwork and discussion is to be found throughout the literature. Shulman (1984) has a section devoted to the topic and both Yalom (1985) and Whitaker (2001) deal with the issue comprehensively. Douglas (1991) also deals with the needs of the individual in the group in his text on common groupwork problems. Nevertheless, it seems clear from this study that, in order to cater fully for the individual needs of students, it is necessary to provide a combination of individual and group supervision. Many students find individual supervision a special source of support in itself. It provides opportunities to provide advice individually tailored to the personal characteristics of the student and the individual placement. It also provides opportunities to make links between practice and the student's own life experiences, some of which the student may not be prepared to discuss in a more public forum. Arguably, it is the most appropriate setting in which to give individual feedback, especially if this is of a personal nature. It is also necessary so as to be able to cater satisfactorily for the diverse learning styles of students. Not all students learn in the same way. It would be a contradiction to adopt a programme of group supervision in order to take advantage of the range of learning methods that it presents and then to discard the learning opportunities offered that are peculiar to individual contact. The consensus among both students and practice teachers was that a system of group supervision alternating with individual supervision allowed them to draw on the benefits of both approaches most effectively. This conclusion supports similar findings by Davis (2002) and by Walter and Young (1999)

The second grouping of disadvantages identified by students, on closer examination, may not necessarily prove to be examples of disadvantage at all. Rather, they seemed to be examples of situations that could be eliminated by improvements in practice. Some practice teachers, reflecting on the discomfort of students in

group supervision, had concluded that there were some changes in practice which they could institute in the future to deal with this. Similarly employing principles of good groupwork practice could eliminate a number of other situations perceived as disadvantages by the students. Providing half an hour individual supervision for students, in turn, in the same room as other students, does not amount to group supervision and was rightly perceived by the recipients as 'short changing' by the practice teacher. Stages of group development need to be taken into account, for example attention needs to be paid to issues of inclusion for students, so that they are able to experience the benefits of group learning quickly. Similarly a good group facilitator would be able to handle feedback in such a way that the students experienced it positively. Few teachers would consider it good practice to make comparisons between students, should they be favourable or unfavourable. Some practice teachers provided a good example of groupwork practice in the work that they had done on their co-working relationship and in building in time for evaluation, reflection and further planning.

Careful consideration of group composition would avoid the situation of new students being overawed by those ahead of them in the programme. There are advantages and disadvantages associated with both heterogeneous and homogeneous groups. Brown (1994) quotes Redl's (1951) law of 'optimum distance' which states that groups should be 'homogeneous enough to ensure stability and heterogeneous enough to ensure vitality' (p.47). It could be argued that students at a more advanced stage could help those coming behind them, while at the same time gain a sense of their own development. However, Whitaker (2001) suggests that groups work best if they are homogeneous in respect of level of vulnerability and heterogeneous in respect of preferred defences. In this case it is preferable that student groups are constructed so as to be homogeneous in terms of the stage of their course, since experience suggests that students feel much more vulnerable during their first period of practice learning than their second.

The qualitative data obtained from the interviews with the students and practice teachers clearly highlights the high level of skill required by practice teachers who wish to provide

opportunities for their students in group learning. It is not sufficient for them to be skilled teachers; they also need to be experienced skilled and knowledgeable group facilitators. The high level of competence required to undertake this work is well documented in the literature (Bogo, 1993; Bogo et al, 2004; Ellis and Douche, 1994; O'Dee, 1995; Shulman, 1984; Walter and Young, 1999). The findings from this study were presented to a group of practice teachers, agency managers and academics from across Northern Ireland in May 2004. As in the rest of the UK, practice teachers in Northern Ireland are required to undertake training and be formally assessed and accredited in the role by the professional body. While there was unanimous support for an approach in which individual and group supervision was combined, the presentation raised serious concerns about the level of knowledge, experience and skill in group facilitation amongst local practice teachers. A survey conducted on the day revealed that of the 21 practice teachers who responded only 9 (43%) felt sufficiently prepared to undertake the work required.

The quantitative data from the questionnaire indicates that group learning in the supervision of social work students is a common enough activity but even when it is used, the average frequency (3.4 times) suggests that it is most frequently used to address practical learning issues, for example information on induction, advice about portfolio construction etc., rather than process. It is clear that the students derive benefit, mainly in terms of peer support and the opportunity to learn from each other, even when meeting on only a few occasions during the practice period. However, there were only a few examples where group supervision was sufficiently frequently for students to benefit from the trusting relationships and cohesive atmosphere that can only develop over time. At the time of the study students spent 14 weeks in practice learning each year and this made it difficult for practice teachers to provide a substantial group learning experience. The introduction of a new qualification nationally has brought about an increase in practice learning and with it increased periods in practice of 20 weeks. This change should provide increased possibilities for practice teachers to provide more substantial group learning opportunities.



## **Conclusion**

The results of this study are produced at a time when a new framework for social work education and training is being implemented throughout the U.K. Following a long period of cuts in services which resulted in a diminished demand for qualified social workers, most areas are experiencing serious shortages again and social work programmes are struggling to find ways of providing more student places and more relevant and imaginative learning opportunities. This report, therefore, is timely.

This study adds to our knowledge of group supervision on social work practice placements by highlighting both students' and practice teachers' experience and perceptions of the approach. The experience of the students in this study was that group supervision, when done well, contributes significantly to their learning and this perception is shared by practice teachers. The research suggests a model of good practice in which group supervision is alternated with individual supervision and in which practice teachers draw on principles of best group work facilitation, attending to issues of preparation, group maintenance, monitoring and intervention. Although some had a few reservations, the overwhelming response of students who had experienced group supervision was extremely positive. One such student made the point that whether or not students experienced the benefits of group supervision should not be left to the chance of being placed with a practice teacher who was responsible for more than one student. Social work programmes, therefore, should consider whether singleton practice teachers should form syndicates to come together to provide group supervision for small numbers of students working in similar areas of practice. However research in this area is still at an early stage, in spite of Prieto's (1996) complaint that:

Despite the continuing popularity of this training format, a decade has passed since Holloway and Johnston's (1985) recommendation to better research and understand the group supervision process, and their suggestion has largely gone unheeded. (p.305)

Further research is needed to establish whether the benefits of group learning in practice learning exist in reality rather than just in perception and whether student group supervision actually results in more effective beginning practitioners. Additionally, practice teachers need to feel confident about delivering practice learning in student groups. Learning opportunities in the approach must be provided as a part the accreditation training and education of practice teachers and top up events should be provided for experienced teachers.

## **Acknowledgement**

The author would like to thank the students and practice teachers who gave so generously of their time to this project and also Sue Orton of the Social Policy and Social Work Subject Centre, HE Academy, (SWAP) for her support and advice.

## **References**

- Abercrombie, M.L.J. (1983) The application of some principles of group analytic psychotherapy to higher education. in M. Pines (Ed) *The Evolution of Group Analysis*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul
- Arkin, N., Freund, A., and Saltman, I. (1999) A group supervision model for broadening multiple-method skills of social work students. *Social Work Education*, 18, 1, 49-58
- Arvidsson, B., Lofgren, H. and Fridund, B. (2001) Psychiatric Nurses' conceptions of how a group supervision programme in nursing care influences their professional competence: A 4-year follow-up study. *Journal of Nursing Management*, 3, 161-171
- Bamford, D. and McVicker, H. (1999) Group approaches within social work education and training. *Issues in Social Work Education*, 19, 1, 35-54
- Bogo, M. (1993) The student/field instructor relationship: The critical factor in field instruction. *The Clinical Supervisor*, 11, 2, 23-36
- Bogo, M., Globerman, J. and Sussman, T. (2004) The field instructor as group worker: Managing trust and competition in group supervision, *Journal of Social Work Education*, 40, 1, 13-26

- Borders, L.D. (1991) A systematic approach to peer group supervision *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 69, 3, 248-252
- Brown, A. (1994) *Groupwork*. (3rd ed) Aldershot: Arena
- Brown, A. and Bourne, I. (1996) *The Social Work Supervisor*. Buckingham: Open University Press
- Burgess, H., and Jackson, S. (1990) Enquiry and action learning: A new approach to social work education. *Social Work Education*, 9, 3, 3-19
- Davis, B. (2002) Group supervision as a learning laboratory for the purposeful use of self in child protection work. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 22, 1/2, 183-198
- Douglas, T. (1991) *A Handbook of Common Groupwork Problems*. London: Tavistock
- Ellis, M.V. and Douce, L.A. (1994) Group supervision of novice clinical supervisors: Eight recurring issues. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 72, 5, 520-525
- Ford, K. and Jones, A. (1987, *Student Supervision*. Basingstoke: Macmillan/BASW
- Hillerbrand, E. (1989) Cognitive differences between experts and novices: Implications for group supervision. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 67, 5, 293-296
- Hodge, J. (1985) *Planning for Co-leadership*. Grapevine [43 Fern Ave, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, NE2 2QU]
- Holloway, E. and Johnston, R. (1985) Group supervision: Widely practiced but poorly understood. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 24, 332-340
- Jaques, D. (2000) *Learning Groups*. (3rd ed) London: Kogan Page
- Kadushin, A. (1976) *Supervision in Social Work*. New York: Columbia University Press
- Kadushin, A. and Harkness, D. (2002) *Supervision in Social Work*. (4th ed) New York: Columbia University Press
- Mary, N.L. and Herse, M.H. (1992) What do field seminars accomplish? Student and instructor perspectives. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 6, 2, 59-73
- Mason, L. (1999) A cooperative study to identify strategies for group supervision in occupational therapy fieldwork placements, *Occupational Therapy International*, 6, 3, 224-242
- Miles, M. and Hubberman, A. (1994) *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded sourcebook*. London: Sage

- Nichol, D. (1997) *Research on Learning and Higher Education Teaching*. UCoSDA Briefing Paper 45. Sheffield: Universities and Colleges Staff Development Agency
- O'Dee, M. (1995) Using groupwork methods in social work education. *Groupwork*, 8, 2, 186-176
- Powles, W.E. (2000) Response to special issue on group supervision of group psychology. *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy*, 50, 2, 251-253
- Prieto, L.R. (1996) Group supervision: Still widely practiced but poorly understood. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 35, 295-307
- Redl, F. (1951) Art of group composition. in S. Shulze (Ed) *Creative Living in a Children's Institution*. New York: Association Press
- Rosenthal, L. (1999) Group supervision of groups: a modern analytic perspective. *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy*, 49, 2, 197-213
- Sales, E., and Navarre, E. (1970) *Individual and Group Supervision in Field Instruction: A research report*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, School of Social Work
- Shulman, L. (1984) *The Skills of Helping: Individuals and groups*. (2nd ed) Ithaca, Ill: F.E. Peacock
- Shulman, (1987) The hidden group in the classroom: The use of group process in teaching groupwork practice, *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 1, 2, Fall/Winter, 3-31
- Schutz, W.C. (1958) *FIRO: A Three-dimensional theory of interpersonal behaviour*. New York: Reinhart
- Schiller, L.Y. (1995) Stages of development in women's groups: A relational model. in R. Kurland and R. Salmon (Eds) *Groupwork Practice in a Troubled Society: Problems and opportunities*. Binghampton, NY: Haworth Press
- Schiller, L.Y. (1997) Rethinking stages of development in women's groups: Implications for practice. *Social Work with Groups*, 20, 3, 3-19
- Skunk, D.H. and Hanseon, A.R. (1985) Peer models: Influence on children's self-efficacy and achievement, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 77, 313-322
- Taylor, I. (1996) Enquiry and action learning: Empowerment in social work education. in S. Jackson and M. Preston-Shoot (eds) *Educating Social Workers in Changing Policy Context*. London: Whiting Birch
- Tebb, S., Manning, D.W., and Klaumann, T.K. (1996) A renaissance in group supervision in practicum, *The Clinical Supervisor*, 14, 2, 39-51
- Tabathi, L.J.V. and Mamasela, S.C. (2001) A framework for the practice of group supervision. *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 37, 3, 222-230

- Walter, C.A. and Young, T.M. (1999) Combining individual and group supervision in educating for the social work profession. *The Clinical Supervisor*, 18, 2, 73-89
- Whitaker, D. S. (2001) *Using Groups to Help People*. (2nd ed) Hove: Brunner-Routledge
- Yalom, I.D. (1995) *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*. (4th ed) New York: Basic Books