

# Practice education in Wales: Progress and limitations

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the role of the Practice Educator and the need for further exploration of research in Wales. Practice Educators make an important contribution to practice learning. This paper debates the 'role' conflict between practice assessor and 'educator'. The literature that is currently available on Practice Education in the United Kingdom includes the perspectives of Practice Educators in England. Little is known about the 'role' of the Practice Educator in Wales. This paper argues that a 'body of knowledge' is required to better understand the role of the Practice Educator in Wales.

**Keywords:** practice education; practice educator role; Wales; field education

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**Date of first (online) publication:** 11th February 2022

## **Introduction**

In September 2020 the 'title' of the Practice Assessor in Wales changed to Practice Educator. There are research studies available on Practice Educators in the United Kingdom. Although, these research studies do not provide us with an in-depth understanding on the role of the Practice Educator in Wales because they are England orientated. Furthermore, the research studies that do exist have focused on the relationship between Practice Educator and student on placement. For example, assessing failing social work students on placement. For this reason I embarked on my doctoral journey to further explore the role of the Practice Educator in Wales. My doctoral research study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on Practice Educators by gaining the perspective of Practice Educators on how they understand their role. Importantly, my doctoral research study is interested in understanding the 'role' of the Practice Educator in enabling a student to move from being a novice to an autonomous social work practitioner. This paper begins with a brief discussion on practice learning. This paper debates the role of the Practice Educator and the role conflict between practice assessor and 'educator'. A key message in this paper is that the 'voice' of the Practice Educator on their role needs further exploration.

## **Practice learning: What is it?**

The term practice learning has existed for a very long time in social work education and social work practice (Nixon and Murr, 2006, p.800). Practice learning has been recognised globally for its significant contribution to social work education (Rai, 2004). The reason that practice learning is considered to be a "cornerstone of social work education" is because the student applies theory, demonstrates knowledge and skills, and values to inform their decision making when dealing with real life experiences (Parker, 2006, p.1018; Doel and Shardlow, 1996). In England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland all students are required to undertake 200 days in placement, and this has increased previously from the 130 days that the student spent on placement (Taylor and Bogo, 2013). In other parts of the world such as the United States of America practice learning is referred to as 'field education'. Field education is also known as 'field instruction' 'field practicum' and 'field work or student supervision'.

## Review of literature

In the United Kingdom the person responsible for assessing students in practice learning/field education is known as a Practice Educator. Practice Educators have a vital role in deciding if a student on placement has the skills and knowledge, and is competent in becoming a qualified social worker. In other countries 'Practice Educators' in social work are known by a different title, for example 'field instructor'. Please see table 1 below.

Table 1

Title given to the 'Practice Educator' in other countries

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Country	Title
United States of America	Field Instructor
Australia	Filed Instructor/Field Educators
Canada	Field Instructor
England	Practice Educator
Scotland	Practice Educator
Wales	Practice Educator
Ireland	Practice Teacher

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In the United Kingdom and international countries such as Australia Practice Educators/Field Educators are qualified social workers with a minimum of two years full-time practice experience.

## The practice educator role

The Practice Educator role is undertaken along with being a social worker (Williams and Rutter, 2010). However, there are Practice Educators who work independently and these are 'off-site' Practice Educators. The role is complex, challenging, requires dedication and commitment (Lefevre, 2005). A key role of the Practice Educator is to enable students on placement with linking theory to practice and encouraging reflection (Parker, 2006). This is not an easy task particularly if the Practice Educator is assessing a failing social work student on placement (Finch and Taylor, 2013). The role of the Practice Educator can be isolating for independent and off-site practitioners (Finch, 2017). In Wales, the regulatory body for the social work

profession, Social Care Wales describe the role of the Practice Educator as “promoting learning, teaching, assessment and management” (Social Care Wales, 2019, p.5). It is important to mention here that there have been significant changes to the ‘title’ of the Practice Educator role in England and Wales (please see table 2 below).

Table 2  
changes to the ‘title’ of the Practice Educator role in England and Wales

Date	Title
1989	Prior to 1989 Practice Teachers had the title of ‘Social Work Supervisors’
1990	The term ‘social work supervisor’ was replaced by ‘Practice Teacher’ in 1990 by the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work.
2000/21	Practice Assessor role was created because of shortage in Practice Teachers
2012	The ‘title’ of Practice Educator confirmed in England
2020	The ‘title’ of Practice Educator confirmed in Wales

The Practice Educator role has evolved from being ‘assessor’ to ‘educator’ and until September 2020 anyone assessing a social work student on placement was known as a Practice Assessor in Wales. There are key areas that Practice Educators have to be familiar with and have awareness of as part of their role and they are as follows: knowledge, skills, values, approach to learning, emotional intelligence and resilience in order to develop confidence and self-awareness in the student on placement (Gibson, 2012). The role of the Practice Educator requires an array of skills such as effective communication, negotiation, mediating, and effective listening (Wilson, 2013). The role of the Practice Educator is crucial in providing a learner with feedback so that they can reflect on their practice (Wilks and Spivey, 2010). Importantly, the role of the Practice Educator is to ensure that the learner can “enhance and maintains resilience” (Collins, 2007, p.266). Practice Educators have to balance their workload to provide the student on placement with supervision, keep their knowledge updated and respond to continuous policy reforms that are introduced by the government. Despite all of these challenges Practice Educators remain committed to the profession of social work because they want to make a difference in the professional life of the developing future social work practitioner on

placement (Waterhouse, McLagan and Murr, 2011). In England, there have been attempts to raise the profile of Practice Educators, for example the published report by Professor Croisdale-Appleby (2014), unfortunately the same cannot be said for Wales. Of course, we are aware that Practice Education in social work in Wales requires further attention. However, there is limited published empirical research literature in Wales which is desperately needed to highlight the vital role of the Practice Educator. As Stone (2016, p.715) informs us that “practice educators have a relevant and meaningful role in the ongoing transformative learning for social work practice”. Although, despite some research studies giving the Practice Educator a ‘voice’ to share their perspectives on their role there remains a gap in research literature on role conflict between ‘assessor’ and ‘educator’.

### **Role conflict: Practice Assessor and ‘educator’**

Searches on Practice Educators in social work in the United Kingdom indicate that there are more published journal articles in England. The literature that is available informs us that there is a conflict in how the social work practice assessor/educator understand their role (Finch, 2013). For example practice assessors view their role as “nurturer and enabler of learning” whereas a practice ‘educator’ understands their role as instilling confidence and preparing an individual for future practice (Finch, 2015). Role conflict challenges are not just experienced by social work Practice Educators rather there is research literature to confirm that ‘role conflict’ also occurs in other professions such as nursing (Duze, 2012). When roles are not properly spelt out or when there is confusion on role responsibilities, practitioners will experience role conflict (Duze, 2012). Nursing practitioners have multidimensional roles and conflict can occur when there is no clear role expectation (Millslagle and Morley, 2004). Practice Educators must a clear perception of their role as they have the final decision to make on whether to pass or fail the student on placement (Finch and Poletti, 2014). Pritchard (1995) and Feasey (2002) inform us that occupying multiple roles can create tensions because the practice assessor/educator can be reluctant to take on additional responsibilities which can influence the educator-student relationship on placement. This is a view shared by Shardlow and Doel (1996) who argue that practice assessors find it difficult to acknowledge their role as ‘assessor’ which influences their

decision on failing a social work student on placement. The role is further conflicted because of bureaucratic processes, political, social, financial constraints and organisational procedures which all pose challenges for the Practice Educator in navigating their diverse and multifaceted role. Finch and Taylor (2013, p.248) in their study interviewed twenty practice assessors who were all encouraged to share their “stories” on their role. A limitation of this research study was that practice assessors included were from ten universities in England. Although, despite this study not including the perspective of practice assessor/educators in Wales it has important implications for future practitioners. This is because a key finding in this study was that practice assessor/educators struggled to adapt to multiple roles for example being an ‘assessor’ and ‘manager’ (Finch and Taylor, 2013). An important message in this study was that further research is required to address potential role conflict in order to better understand the role of the Practice Educator. In a later study by Finch (2015) it was found that Practice Educators are not always comfortable discussing their role because of lack of support within organisations. This study is pertinent in understanding the role of the Practice Educator, although the nine participants in this study were drawn from universities in England. Similarly, the empirical research undertaken by Stone (2016) incorporates the ‘voice’ of the Practice Educator, although this study does not compare the experiences of other Practice Educators in the United Kingdom such as Wales. Of course, this research study increases our understanding of the role of the Practice Educator, although unless we share narratives of good practice and experiences across the United Kingdom we cannot raise the profile of Practice Educators and the important work they do in motivating learners in becoming autonomous practitioners. Furthermore, we also need to hear from Practice Educators about the resources they use to consolidate their practice. In a current study by Pithouse, Rees, Brookfield and Djupvik (2021) entitled “understanding social work-force satisfaction” it was found that practitioners do not always get the time to share their experiences of practice. Professor Donald Forrester, Director of CASCADE at The University of Cardiff a highly regarded academic in social work articulates that practitioners need the opportunity to develop professional autonomy and professional space so that practitioners working outside of the university can strengthen their ties with institutions. This was echoed by Domakin (2015) and in her paper discusses the challenges that Practice Educators encounter in taking on the role of ‘educator’. A key theme highlighted in this paper was that a stronger rapport with

universities was significant to strengthen the role of the Practice Educator. The experiences shared by Practice Educators in this paper identify the need for “integration” and partnership working to share ideas in order to reduce isolation (Domakin, 2015, p.405). This paper provides valuable insight on how Practice Educators cope with additional responsibilities of being an ‘educator’ (Domakin, 2015). However, a limitation of this paper as acknowledged by Domakin (2015, p.408) is that the experiences of Practice Educators are from one English region and “do not include perspective of Practice Educators working in other areas of the United Kingdom”. Therefore, while this paper is relevant in relation to the central role of the Practice Educator, the experiences of Practice Educators in this paper have to be approached with caution as they are not applicable to Wales. In order for students to experience excellent placement learning opportunities recognition is required in acknowledging the important role of the Practice Educator (Parker, 2010). For example as Domakin (2015, p.409) states “specialist roles” so that the skill set of Practice Educators can be maximised. Unless Practice Educators are given the space and time to do their role properly he/she cannot carry out their role effectively and meet the demands and expectations of student and institution (Finch, 2017). This is a view shared by Yeung, Newman and Burke (2019, p.11) who discuss the emotional challenge and conflict that Practice Educators encounter when supporting students on placement whilst also trying to be a gate-keeper to the profession. A strength of this study is that it argues for “a body of knowledge useful for Practice Educators to manage their multi-faceted role”. However, as with previous studies mentioned above this study involved Practice Educators from the North West of England. A further limitation of this study is that focus groups were conducted with Masters level student and did not incorporate the view of the undergraduate student. It is important that undergraduate students are incorporated within research studies that involve Practice Educators because past research by Pithouse and Scourfield (2002) stress that students have a different understanding of “preparedness” for practice and this can cause a role conflict between Practice Educator and student on placement. Tedam (2011) shares the sentiments of Pithouse and Scourfield (2002) and points out that the role of the Practice Educator is to encourage students to make ‘personal and life’ experience links where appropriate in their practice when working with individuals. Tedam’s (2011) ‘Mandela Cycle’ lends itself well for Practice Educators to reflect on their role and student learning. This concurs with Joubert (2020, p.16) who in her study stresses the importance

of students developing certain “attributes” in being able to merge theory and practice together. This study recognised that practice learning has a vital role in student performance on placement. Furthermore made the recommendation that “educators and practice assessors need to look at the holistic readiness for practice journey” (Joubert, 2020, p.19). However, a weakness of this study is that it captured the views of students only.

## Conclusion

This paper has explained the role of the Practice Educator. Furthermore, this paper has discussed the role conflict between practice assessor and educator. The role of Practice Educator is complex and requires further investigation. There is a need for a ‘body of knowledge’ to open up dialogue on the challenges that Practice Educators encounter in their role so that he/she can be given the time for reflection and professional autonomy to undertake their role. My doctoral research study is a step in the right direction in opening up debate about the role of the Practice Educator in Wales. Dialogue about the role of the Practice Educator can only take place when the experiences, perspectives and ‘voice’ of Practice Educators are acknowledged and valued.

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