

Student social workers in school settings: A practice assessor's perspective

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Summary: Much has been written about the experiences of student social workers who are based in schools for their practice learning opportunity (Hafford-Letchfield & Spatcher, 2007; Wilson & Hillison 2004; Craddock 2006; Fielding 2006). This article sets out to record the experience from the perspective of two Practice Assessors, who were employed by Newcastle City Council. Each Practice Assessor worked with approximately six students per year who were placed in a range of schools including primary schools, secondary school, schools for children with special educational needs and behavioural units. During the school holidays the students were placed in Children's Social Care Services teams, which provided valuable experience of working in statutory settings. These are complex practice learning opportunities and the role of the Practice Assessor is pivotal. Students need to be motivated and pro-active, which has implications for careful matching of students to the learning opportunities available. This article examines the role of the Practice Assessor in relation to preparing students and link workers, identifying learning opportunities and supervising students..

Keywords: therapeutic and statutory work; supervision; complementary learning opportunities

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Introduction

Newcastle and Gateshead's Education Departments and Children's Social Care Services departments have worked together over the past four years to plan and provide social work practice learning opportunities (placements) in both primary and secondary schools. This complies with government guidance in this area (*Working Together to Safeguard Children*, DfES, 2004) and the responsibilities under section 175 of the Education Act 2002, which highlight the crucial role played by schools in keeping children safe. In the first year of the initiative twelve placements were provided to Northumbria University. This proved extremely successful and by year two this number had doubled to twenty four. This has now been further expanded to encompass other Universities and other local authorities in the region.

The authors of this article are qualified social workers who hold a Practice Teaching Award and are highly experienced in providing off-site practice teaching. These are essential requirements as Practice Assessors need to be confident in their own ability to assist students to relate social work theories and values to their practice and to develop a social work identity within a school setting. Preparation also included ensuring that parents and carers were notified of the presence of a social work student in the school. The students were also required to seek permission from parents and carers prior to working with any children. Both Practice Assessors had previous experience of supervising students in school settings, such as placements with the Education Welfare Service, which was important as this enabled them to provide informed advice and support (Parker et al., 2003; Wilson and Hillison 2005). As Wilson and Hillison (2005, p. 76) observed:

Practice Assessors with a background, understanding or experience of work in schools or other education settings have a key role to play in providing effective and informed support to the students and in clarification and negotiation with the schools.

Research carried out by Malcolm Craddock (2006, p.13) stated that:

Prior meetings with the Practice Assessor were deemed useful by schools, but the point was made more than once in interviews (by school staff and Practice Assessors) that knowledge of schools by Practice Assessors

could be out -of-date. Practice Assessors interviewed certainly saw their own familiarity with schools as essential to their role in supporting these students.

Student social workers in schools

The Practice Assessors were involved from the very early stages of the planning process, and (as with any off-site practice learning opportunity) the Practice Assessors worked closely with identified link workers within the practice agency. Adequate preparation and planning are essential for a successful placement and there needs to be mutual understanding of the expectations of the placement (Wilson and Hillison, 2005). Fielding (2006) identified areas which needed to be explored with link workers. These included: appropriate work load, expectations of the type of work in which students could/could not get involved, possible gaps in National Occupational Standards and how these might be filled, examination of differences between social work students and student teachers and opportunities which would allow for formal assessment. They also worked with teaching staff (usually head teachers and link workers) to outline the National Occupational Standards for Social Work in England (standards and requirements which the students needed to evidence as part of their assessment). Once these were explained (for example, communicate and engage with pupils and carers; assess need and plan intervention and so forth), the link workers were themselves able to identify learning opportunities, which would allow these requirements to be evidenced in a school setting. As Riddell & Tett (2001) state effective collaborative practice in schools depends on professionals with different skills working together. At the initial meeting between student, link worker and Practice Assessor it was necessary to link the National Occupational Standards to the specific learning opportunities available in the school. This helped everyone involved to be clear how the placement could meet the needs of the student. This was especially reassuring to the students who could not always visualise how these placements could meet their learning needs. Not all placements were viewed positively. One placement which was not deemed by the student to have been successful overall elicited the following comments:

There could have been a lot more preparation. Schools need to have a better understanding of the social work role and be prepared to identify work and have work to do. School has a responsibility to be aware of what they're taking on: It's a two-way street. (Craddock, 2006, p.12)

Most schools had prepared for the placement by identifying the young people they wished the students to work with. This was usually around issues of anger, bullying, self esteem and emotional well-being. This was fairly difficult in the first year of the project; however, in subsequent years the Practice Assessors were in a position to assist teaching staff to identify other learning opportunities, as practice teachers/assessors have an important role in negotiating and managing the different expectations within the placement (Parker et al., 2003). Some of these learning opportunities included the possibility that students might work with children who were currently involved with Children's Social Care Services, including Looked After Children as well as those where there were child protection concerns. Part of the student's role could include attending meetings on behalf of the school and liaising with social workers to identify work, which might be undertaken within the school setting. Students were well placed to be involved in child protection work and this was enhanced by their connections with the Children's Social Care Services Teams. Other opportunities for statutory work within the school included working with CAMHS Teams. One student reporting on her experience to students and link workers stated:

I was provided with my own caseload of vulnerable young people with varying needs. These cases would be referred to me via an inclusion meeting which consisted of an array of staff members, via my link worker or via the designated teacher (if child protection or Looked After Children) within the School.

In the initial stages of the placement the students had an induction period to familiarise themselves with different aspects of working in a school and become acquainted with the staff and pupils. During this period some students questioned their social work role. It was the responsibility of the Practice Assessors to enable the students to recognise their role and identify ways to develop their skills in working with the children and young people around a variety of issues. There were several recurring themes including bereavement, domestic violence, attachment and resilience.

School placements gave students ample opportunities to consider professional values as they worked within the different value systems of teaching staff and other professionals. At times, some students felt isolated practising social work in an educational setting and were concerned that school staff had difficulty appreciating their role, but they also saw the benefits of working with education professionals. They recognised how their placements gave them a greater understanding of the school system and introduced them to the constraints on teaching staff time and resources. They saw how this would benefit their future practice as this project promoted mutual understanding between social workers and school staff. This was a valuable learning opportunity, as placements in schools enabled them to develop their knowledge, skills and practice in inter-disciplinary working (Parker et al., 2003).

Baginsky (2007) noted there are misunderstandings between teachers and social workers, including their different perspectives and perceptions of each other's role and responsibilities. Social work students in these school placements have worked to increase the awareness of the different professionals' roles and responsibilities. Teaching staff and parents were also able to gain a much deeper understanding of the role of the social worker. This has been influential, as teachers have identified the need for greater understanding of the role of different professionals working with children and different procedures (Baginsky, 2008). As Corby (2005, p187) indicates

individual teaching staff may have little ongoing contact with social workers, and therefore, be uncertain about trusting them to act appropriately

So, having a well informed link worker, who has regular contact with social workers and other professionals is essential to improve communication and ensure a consistent approach. Whilst working with school staff student social workers have an important role in developing greater understanding of the social work role and establishing better working relationships. This is a helpful contribution to addressing the need for better communication between teachers and social workers, which as Baginsky (2007) observed must be improved to address common perceptions and misunderstandings of each other's roles and share knowledge, information and experience when making professional decisions.

Student social workers had greater autonomy than teaching staff and could work with children and parents in their own homes where considered appropriate by Practice Assessor and school staff. One student reported

real success with one boy who had behavioural difficulties and had received an exclusion.(Student) visited at home – was excellent – she then carried out one to one work. This really changed his life – it was absolutely fantastic, a transformation’ (Craddock, 2006 p.28).

During school holidays Newcastle Children’s Social Care Services provided learning opportunities to the students. The aim was to provide additional, complementary learning opportunities, which have previously been found beneficial (Parker et al., 2003) and a mix of statutory and therapeutic work. In the first year of the project the students spent time with the teams during school holidays in the middle of the placement, but following feedback from the students, the arrangements were structured to enable the students to spend three days with the teams during the first month of the placement, then subsequently parts of the school holidays. Some students spent one day per week for a designated period of time with child care services to meet their individual learning needs. This needed careful planning to meet individual needs and provide good learning opportunities. One of the Practice Assessors took responsibility for this in consultation with a senior manager in Children’s Social Care Services.

While working with the children and families teams the students initially shadowed social workers and then undertook a variety of interventions including carrying out assessments, supporting workers in child protection work, attending a variety of meetings involving professionals and service users and developed their skills in report writing and recording. Some students worked with children and young people who were involved with Children’s Social Care Services and attended the school where they were on placement. This proved very beneficial, as the students were able to work individually with children in the school as part of the child care plan. Students found spending time in two settings was challenging, but it gave them additional opportunities to develop skills and manage their time to balance the needs of school and the children and families teams.

The students found the time spent with the children and families’

teams an excellent complementary learning opportunity, as this provided a balance of statutory and therapeutic work and gave them an insight into a range of different approaches to intervention. One commented this was '*an excellent mix of statutory and therapeutic work*' and '*an excellent opportunity for personal development*'. The students also helped establish closer links between the schools and Children's Social Care Services, in accordance with *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2004). This liaison was greatly appreciated by both the children and families' team managers, who saw the benefit of having closer links with schools, and school staff, who recognised the students had good support from the area teams and regarded this as a valuable development. As one teacher commented:

... Education and Social Services should be working closely together for the good of the children and this arrangement fits in perfectly with *Every Child Matters*.

This positive experience fitted with the findings of Parker et al. (2003), that involving the students in children and families teams benefited the students, schools and the services provided to children and families.

Good supervision is always an important part of the learning process in any placement however it is vital in these schools placements. The three key elements which permeate the literature surrounding supervision are education, support and management (Ford and Jones, 1987; Shardlow and Doel, 1998). The teaching role is particularly relevant in school placements. Students need to be taught how the work referred by the school staff can be related to the theories which have been taught in the University. This was evident when a student was given a referral by a teacher to work with a pupil around issues of anger. The practice assessor needed to point out to the student that the issue of anger was the 'presenting problem' and that an assessment would need to be carried out in order to discover the actual problem. Once this had been ascertained the student would need to decide on the method of intervention which would be followed by evaluation. In this case the student, using assessment skills, discovered that the pupil was being socially excluded because he was overweight. The student's intervention consisted of encouraging the young person to join her friendship club, identifying resources both inside and outside school

for the young person to join, discussing healthy eating and providing strategies for coping with his anger. Evaluation of this work showed that it was a successful piece of intervention as the pupil became part of a friendship group and with his newly gained confidence joined in after school football with the result that his anger was no longer an issue in school.

Alongside individual supervision, the Practice Assessors met together with all of the students who were placed in Newcastle schools on a monthly basis to provide group supervision. This proved very popular with students as it helped to combat their feelings of isolation. It also gave the students opportunities to share their placement experiences. In the early weeks of the placement it was helpful for the students to realise that they were all at the same stage of learning about the systems within the school prior to commencing any work with the pupils. At later stages they were able to exchange ideas and resources and discuss any issues and dilemmas they were experiencing in placement. The students took turns to present a piece of work that they were undertaking to the group which allowed them to discuss the relevant issues and gain peer feedback. This enabled them to develop skills and confidence in presenting work to a group.

Initially, some students were apprehensive how they would meet all their learning needs in a school setting, but as the placements progressed they appreciated the variety of learning opportunities and saw how they developed skills in therapeutic and statutory assessment and intervention. This included recognition how their work with children and young people individually and in groups enabled the children and young people to consider their feelings, address issues, build their self esteem and improve their social interaction within school and their families. They saw how this enabled children and young people to develop supportive relationships within school, which helped build protective factors to promote their resilience and increase their capacity to cope with adversity (Gilligan, 2001). The students provided valuable preventative work to children, young people and their parents/carers to enable them to address issues, provide support and work to prevent further problems. Being based in school meant the students were readily accessible, which was beneficial at a time when the thresholds for involvement from Children's Social Care Services were high, so families may not have received a service at that stage.

Through their contacts and liaison with social workers in Children's

Social Care Services and other professionals the students identified how their work contributed to assessment, planning and intervention with children, young people, families and their parents/carers with children in need, safeguarding and work with looked after children. As they had ongoing regular contact with the children and young people and teaching staff in schools they were able to make a valuable contribution to monitoring and reviewing children and young people's progress.

The complementary learning experiences in children and families teams provided the students with opportunities to work directly with social workers. This was particularly beneficial for students who were less proactive and needed experience of a more structured setting. It became clear from a very early stage in the process that students needed to develop their ability to be self motivated and proactive to maximise their learning experience in the school, which is a key factor in developing their placement experience (Parker et al., 2003). Some students had difficulty with this and the students who were most successful were those who had some previous knowledge of statutory social work. Students who failed usually did so because they were unable to function alone in what could be perceived to be an alien environment. They did not have the confidence to approach teaching staff for referrals, or work on their own initiative in providing a service within the school. However, these students also struggled during their time with the children and families teams, which might lead us to conclude that they may have failed their placement regardless of the setting.

All those involved in the project recognised the value of these practice learning opportunities. The teaching staff reported that they have benefited greatly from the project and felt that work on anger management, self-esteem and bullying were especially helpful (Fielding, 2006). Link workers commented that having social work students on placement in schools was very worthwhile. They recognised areas of difference, but saw the benefits of the students' perspectives, approaches, social work skills, the time they spent with pupils and parents and establishing closer links with Children's Social Care Services and other agencies. The Practice Assessors recognised how the variety of learning opportunities enabled the students to develop their role and work in an innovative, preventative way in an educational setting. Seeing how the children and young people interacted with their peers and staff on a daily basis gave the students a more holistic view of

their needs. The students had plentiful opportunities to develop their skills and confidence working therapeutically with children and young people alongside carrying out statutory social work.

At a time when some social work programmes are having difficulty in identifying placements this has reversed the trend as other schools in the region would like the opportunity to offer placements. Other schools have requested the opportunity to partake in this initiative however numbers have been limited by the capacity of Children's Social Care Services to offer opportunities during the school holidays.

These learning experiences enabled students to develop professionally and meet the National Occupational Standards required for the placement. Some students initially expressed concerns about how these placements may affect their ability to obtain employment in a statutory social work setting. These fears have proved unfounded. Since qualifying, students who have been involved with this initiative have been well equipped to move into employment in various areas including children and families teams and educational settings.

Conclusion

Practice Assessors undertaking work with student social workers in schools need to be experienced in off-site practice teaching and where possible have some understanding of the systems within the school. They should be involved with the process from the planning stage in order to act as a conduit between school, university and student. This includes assisting the school and student to relate learning opportunities to National Occupational Standards and identifying additional learning opportunities where needed. They should have the ability to assist the student to relate social work theory and values to the work undertaken in the school. They need to provide supervision on a weekly basis and where possible arrange for group supervision at least once a month. Social work student placements in schools are difficult to arrange and can be complex; however, they do give students a unique opportunity to work in a school setting undertaking both statutory and therapeutic work. The school pupils benefit from having the opportunity to work in small groups or on a one to one basis around issues, which have caused them distress. Teaching staff develop a greater understanding of

the role of the social worker. Students have the opportunity to work in a therapeutic manner as well as gaining some experience in statutory social work. These are excellent learning opportunities and Practice Assessors can be pivotal in ensuring their success.

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