Supervising fast track social work students on placement: Evaluating the experiences of trainee practice educators

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Abstract: The last decade has seen the introduction of fast track (FT) social work training programmes as an alternative to 2-year postgraduate courses: Step Up to Social Work began in 2010, joined by Frontline in 2014 and finally Think Ahead, a mental health-focussed social work training programme, in 2016. With the popularity of these courses (Skills for Care analysis of HESA data, 2018), and the uncertainty around the continuation of bursaries, X University validated its own FT social work programme in 2017. While there have been evaluations of the impact of the aforementioned FT training programmes, there is nothing publicly available examining the experiences of the practice educators who assess these students. Using end-of-placement feedback data from a sample of 14 trainee practice educators based in England, this article will discuss their experience of assessing FT students, including how the students performed on placement and the educators' views of their own training programme. Some educators noted a physical and emotional impact on students and a struggle with some to engage in reflective practice. Comments regarding the fast pace of both the FT and practice education programme were also made. Recommendations for the training and support of practice educators supervising FT students will be identified and discussed.

Keywords: fast track, social work education, practice educator, placement

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Introduction

Social work training at postgraduate level has traditionally been delivered via two-year masters programmes. However, the last 10 years have seen a rapid increase in the number of fast-track (FT) postgraduate programmes, allowing students to qualify as social workers in 14 months or less. These programmes have flourished in part, due to well-publicised views that have been critical of the quality of graduates coming through traditional social work education courses. Most notably the report of the Social Work Task Force (2009) and the 2014 reports of Croisdale-Appleby and Narey. The latter report led to the English government's support of Frontline, a national FT work-based programme with a focus on child and family social work (Cartney, 2018). With the significant and likely ongoing growth of FT social work courses, there is a need to explore the experiences of practice educators supervising students on such courses, to understand how FT programmes may impact practice educators' assessment of a student and give suggestions as to what is needed to enable practice educators to successfully undertake their role. It is these points that this evaluation aims to address.

Aims
1. To explore and describe the experiences of trainee practice educators supervising students on a new FT postgraduate social work programme.
2. To understand how a FT programme may impact practice educators' assessment of a student.
3. Assess what may be needed to enable practice educators to successfully undertake their role within the context of supervising a student on a FT programme.

Evaluation questions:
1. What has been the experience of trainee practice educators supervising students completing a FT social work course?
2. What are the trainees' assessment of how students are performing on placement?
3. What can be learnt to enhance the experiences of practice educators supervising FT students, and the students themselves, in future?

Background

In 2017, the social work team at X phased out its two-year social work masters and developed its own FT postgraduate programme designed to attract able students wanting to do university-based training, but over a shorter period of time. The rationale for changing to a FT delivery was precipitated by two main reasons. The first was the uncertainty there had been over the sustainability of the NHS bursary (means- and non-means-tested financial support), for social work students. In an article for the social care magazine *Community Care*, Nicholls (2016) wrote that government officials had indicated they wanted them to 'cut the outlay on social work bursaries…' This was following the coalition government's announcement of a consultation on the future of the bursary (Department of Health 2012).

The second reason for the change to FT delivery was the growth in FT training programmes. The last decade has seen increased government funding, promotion and extension of FT training programmes such as Step up to Social Work, Frontline and Think Ahead. These programmes were introduced with the intention of attracting higher calibre individuals (Clifton & Thorley, 2014) and career changers interested in quickly becoming leaders in social work (MacAlister et al, 2012). 14% of Think Ahead's intake from 2017 was from Oxford or Cambridge, compared with 0.5% of entrants to social work master's in 2011-12 (Think Ahead impact review, 2017). These FT programmes have benefitted from strong financial support from government. Successful applicants can complete their training free of charge and are supported with a tax-free bursary of at least £17000, compared with a bursary of around £3000 - £4000 for a place on a traditional social work programme (Moriarty & Manthorpe, 2018). Students on traditional two-year programmes have seen a deterioration in their financial position in recent years (Hanley, 2019).

The attractive financial offer from FT programmes has undoubtedly contributed to the increased numbers of applicants to these programmes – traditional programmes just cannot compete. During 2015-16, FT schemes accounted for 29% of all students starting a postgraduate social work course (Turner, 2019) and Skills for Care - a strategic body for workforce development in adult social care in England, has noted it, 'intends to monitor the impact of the increasing numbers of students going through graduate entry programmes and the different funding models available' (2019, p.7).

The FT course at X university was carefully planned, ensuring that even with the shorter timeframe, it met the Standards of Proficiency of the then regulator the Health & Care Professions Council (HCPC). It covers the same range of knowledge and skills teaching as a traditional two-year masters, including the need to complete 170 placement days. Entry requirements dictated that as well as having GCSEs in English and Maths at grade C or above (or grade 4-9 in the new English numerical system for grading GCSEs), applicants generally needed to have an upper second class or higher first degree (not necessarily in a health or social care subject), and have relevant paid or voluntary work experience of at least three months gained in the last five years. The new programme was validated by X University and approved by the HCPC in 2017. Delivery began in September 2018 with a cohort of 57 students. The author of this paper took her position as the programme leader from October 2018.

Students undertook a rigorous readiness for placement practice teaching schedule, culminating with a simulated role-play assessed by academics, practitioners and representatives from the social work team's service user participation group. Following the passing of the role-play, students began their first practice placement of 70 days - predominantly within the voluntary and private sector, between November 2018 and March 2019. Assuming the placement began and ended on time, students had a two-week break before commencing their final placement of 100 days from March 2019 - October 2019 (including a total of 4 weeks leave and 5 study days). These placements involved students undertaking statutory tasks and legal interventions (The College of Social Work (TCSW), 2013), mainly within frontline local authority social work teams.

Practice education at X University

Practice educators are social workers who have undertaken additional training in order to teach, supervise and assess student social workers on practice placements. The role involves a range of tasks including supporting students to integrate theory into practice, providing regular supervision and assessing students against the profession's practice standards - the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF). Plenty and Gower (2013) write that practice educators have been and remain an integral part of social work training programmes, indeed without them the

impact on the social work workforce would be damaging. Outside of the United Kingdom (UK), practice educators are called 'field educators' while the practice placement is commonly referred to as 'field education' (Stone, 2016). For convenience, the terms 'practice educator' and 'placement' will be used throughout this paper.

The practice education (PE) course at X consists of two modules: PE stage 1 and PE stage 2. These modules are at masters level and successful completion of them results in the candidate being awarded a Postgraduate Certificate in Advanced Social Work Practice (Practice Education). The course was designed to map to TCSW's Practice Educator Professional Standards, the version of the standards in place before the refreshed standards issued by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) in 2019. Following the introduction of the FT course, an additional PE intake began in March 2019 to align with the timetable for the FT students' final placement. 22 social workers were enrolled of which 14 were allocated FT students. The PE course began in March 2019 with the last teaching session in September of the same year. The final submission required of the trainees in order to qualify as Stage 2 practice educators was submitted by most in October 2019.

Methodology

Purposive sampling was used to obtain the sample of trainees (n=14) who had supervised a FT student. On average, trainees had 5.8 years post-qualified experience. Key data on the entire group as well as the sample are shown in table 1:

In line with the quality assurance benchmark statement and evaluation tools for practice learning (TCSW, 2012), practice educators and students are required to complete a questionnaire or Quality Assurance in Practice Learning (QAPL) form. The form is completed either just before or after, the placement ends, allowing the student and practice educator to freely share their thoughts on the placement and in the practice educator's case, their role. The form includes qualitative and quantitative questions and Likert scale questions. Analysis was made of some of the relevant quantitative data (questions 7, 8 and 10) and all of the qualitative data found in the final 'open text' question. Seven practice educators used this question to feedback more fully on their experiences. The responses were analysed by

the researcher using thematic analysis, a process involving the researcher familiarising herself with the data, assigning codes to data of interest and then developing and naming themes (Whittaker, 2012). Permission was sought from and given by the trainees to use their feedback as part of this study.

Table 1
Trainee practice educator cohort profiles

	Whole cohort	Sample
Sex		
Male	3	3
Female	19	11
Work context		
Local authority Adult social care	2	1
Local authority Children and families	17	12
Adult mental health	2	1
Criminal justice	1	0
Work location		
London	21	14
Outside London	1	0

Limitations

The questions within the QAPL form are fixed, based on the template produced by TCSW and Skills for Care (2012) and so the practice educators were not specifically asked to refer to their experience of supervising a FT student, neither was it mandatory to comment. Therefore, some practice educators gave no comment at all on this point leading to data that is not as 'full' as it could have been. Most of the practice educators for this evaluation (9) came from one London borough's children's services and so the results of this study may be indicative of 'group think' - the 'psychological drive for consensus' (Janis, 1982), and may not be reflective of practice educators across other parts of the UK. Additionally, more detailed information about the characteristics of the trainees, for example, previous supervisory experience or involvement with PE activities, was not available. Such information would have been a helpful lens with which to

analyse the data through.

The small sample size of 14 means the results of this study should be seen as tentative, providing only a snapshot of a potential picture in one area of the UK. Further research with more practice educators and from across the UK would be needed to explore the ideas generated in this paper. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the findings will be of interest to those studying and delivering practice education courses in the UK.

Findings

The responses to questions 7 (regarding whether the placement request was made in good time), and 8 (relating to the setting up and confirmation of arrangements), indicate that most trainees were happy with the pre-placement process with a 'yes' rating of 79% (11) and 86% (12) respectively. The high rating for the pre-placement process was pleasing as the team considered this aspect very important. An efficient pre-placement process not only helps to ensure the placement begins on time - a key factor for a FT programme, but also gives the practice educator and student a solid foundation from which they can build their relationship.

In terms of how sufficiently prepared the student was to learn and be assessed (question 10), 12 practice educators (86%) responded positively to this - only 2 ticked 'no'. This is somewhat surprising considering several trainees made comments in the open text section indicating concerns about their student's preparedness to learn. Question 10 is preceded by questions about the pre-placement process and so it could be that the 'mismatch' is due to the practice educators basing their response on how their student appeared at the *start* of the placement. It could be that the open text section was used to give their overall judgment about the student following completion of the placement. This section was the most revealing in terms of understanding the trainees' views about working with a FT student. 7 of the 14 practice educators (50%) used that section of the form to share their thoughts on working with a FT student. The responses could be broadly organised into three themes: impact on students physically and/or emotionally, impact on ability to reflect and the pace of the FT and PE programmes.

Impact on students physically and emotionally

Some of the trainees noticed that their student had shown physical and/or emotional effects of being on a FT course. Their comments were:

The student struggled to maintain the progress made from midway point which the student said was due to academic demands. The student ended up managing a lower caseload in comparison to previous students'. (Trainee 1)

The student was quite tired and exhausted and it 'took a little while for her to settle back in'. (Trainee 2)

…students appeared quite overwhelmed by the amount of [academic] work they had to complete…this at times could distract from the placement' (Trainee 5)

Impact on ability to reflect

The student struggled to be reflective and show self awareness of her emotions in response to cases'. (Trainee 4)

… if the student has barely anytime to reflect on their learning from the previous placement there may be an impact on their learning'. (Trainee 6)

'… the student studying a fast track course made it hard for her to have time to reflect on her work with her families and absorb the learning and knowledge obtained on placements'. (Trainee 13)

Pace of the PE and/or FT programme

Four of the trainees felt that the pace of the PE and FT course was too fast:

Although my student was good, I think the FT course is run too quickly and does not adequately prepare students for frontline practice'. (Trainee 3)

The PE course and the student's course felt rushed…' (Trainee 5)

I think the FT course is a little too fast and doesn't allow students to fully end the first

70 day placements before starting the more intense 100 day placement'. (Trainee 6)

My only issue has been about the time scope given to the programme [the PE programme], I have found it too condensed impacting upon the quality of my student's reports and the academic learning I am delivering.' (Trainee 7)

... would have preferred a gap between PE1 and 2'. (Trainee 11)

Discussion

Considering the feedback around the physical and/or emotional demands on the students, and the view that their reflection was limited, it should be noted that the very nature of a FT course means that there will be several competing demands on students' time. The need to meet those demands will pose challenges, especially for those who have personal commitments outside of their studies (Smith et al, 2013 and Baginsky and Teague, 2013). The demands of FT training have already been acknowledged, Smith et al (2019) evaluating the Think Ahead programme wrote,

> Whilst most [Think Ahead graduates] were pleased to have undertaken the programme…the sense of unremitting pressure is notable, as indeed it is for all fast-track qualifying programmes in social work. (p.11)

While there is a need for FT students to be robustly assessed, that should to be balanced with the need to support students' wellbeing and the need for them not to go through their programme having only learned and engaged with concepts and tasks on a superficial level. As educators, we should be encouraging and promoting higher level cognitive skills such as analysis and evaluation (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001). This is especially important for students looking to join a profession that aims to apply social work values to working with vulnerable individuals and groups within a complex system including health, housing, law and diverse socio-economic factors to name just a few. Ensuring there is space for students to critically reflect on their work - to talk about the impact of their practice and the role that power plays in that (White et al., 2006) - are key components of allowing these higher-level skills to develop.

The feedback around the pace of the PE and FT programmes was not

entirely surprising. The trainees were the first cohort to experience a PE course that was reconfigured to fall in line with the FT social work programme which itself was running for the first time. Due to these 'firsts', it was perhaps inevitable that issues would arise around scheduling and alignment of the PE course as well as the students' FT course. Although the latter cannot be extended, it can be argued that the feedback reinforces the importance of full and early 'disclosure' to practice educators about the pace of the FT and their own programme. This allows the trainees to fully consider whether they are willing and able to provide the level of commitment required.

It is noteworthy that despite the comments above regarding the pace of the programmes, all but one of the 14 trainees confirmed in question 15 that they would be willing to supervise another student in the future. Evidently, despite the feedback given around the pace of the courses, the experience of supervising a student was valued and considered worthwhile. This is supported by three of the trainees quoted in the last theme above stating:

> …my student was good…' (trainee 3)

> The whole PE experience has been a good one for me'. (Trainee 7)

> I enjoyed the experience…' (trainee 11)

Recommendations

Support for 'tired' students

Research by Collins et al (2008), found that social work students experienced high demands from their courses:

> Demands to be successful on the course, to attend the course regularly, and from academic essays were scored the highest [as sources of stress]. (p.972)

Although Collins et al's study did not involve students on a FT programme, FT students are exposed to the same demands as noted in Collins et al's study. It can be argued that such students also experience high levels of stress - possibly more so and perhaps at a relatively early point in the placement due to the intense nature of their course. Practice

educators of FT students should be mindful of this and consider how they would support a student who is struggling emotionally and/or physically. This should be discussed early in the placement with the placement agreement meeting (held within the first 3-4 weeks of the placement commencing) being a good forum for this discussion to take place. This meeting is attended by the student, their placement tutor (someone from the University) and the practice educator, and is held for all parties to discuss and agree practicalities like hours or work, how much study time will be given as well as they type and amount of work the student will undertake (Lomax and Jones, 2014).

The parties also meet again midway through the placement, to review progress up to that point and agree plans for the last part of the placement. This review meeting should be used as another opportunity to address issues around the student's mental and physical wellbeing. If a student appears at that point to be struggling with their caseload, the practice educator and placement tutor should use the midway meeting to consider whether reasonable adjustments can be made. This could be considered a controversial move: there is a balance to be had between ensuring the student is not feeling overwhelmed, with the need to stretch and challenge students' ability to manage multiple tasks. This being a reflection of what lies ahead as a newly qualified social worker and the expectations of the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE). The ASYE is a 12-month, employer-led programme of support and assessment, to develop national consistency in social workers' knowledge and skills by the end of their first year in employment (Skills for care, online). Any adjustments to a student's caseload would need to be considered in light of the student's learning needs as recorded within the placement documentation, what aspects of practice the student was struggling with, and the need to ensure that the student has engaged with enough of a range of work to meet the professional requirements, the PCF, at 'end of final placement' level.

Practice educators should have clear understanding of the students' programme

The comments from the trainees regarding the fast pace of both the FT and their own programme suggest that perhaps they were not adequately prepared for this and so full and early 'disclosure' about the nature of the two programmes would be beneficial. The trainees in this study were given

a leaflet giving information about the PE programme, but no information about the FT course was given. The author of this paper suggests that guidance around the role of a PE, the tasks involved and information about the FT programme - specifically on the intense mode of delivery, should be provided during the application stage. Practice educators of a FT student need to make an informed decision, ideally in conjunction with their manager, about whether this is a role they will be able to commit to before they complete their enrolment.

Those delivering PE courses should also reiterate and address early on, the intense nature of the course and the FT programme and with regards the latter, give information about the content. This point has been raised by Domakin (2015) who, in her focus groups with practice educators, found that there was concern about not knowing what the student social workers' course curriculum covered. Understanding what has been covered at university is vital to help manage practice educators' expectations of their students. There is a need to recognise that time for academic staff to recap with FT students what has been presented and discussed in teaching sessions is limited, meaning there is an expectation that students undertake independent follow-up through reading and other resources that staff direct them to.

Practice educators will need to be particularly patient and understanding when working with FT students as the expected 'milestones' may not occur at the expected points. Students' 'light bulb' moments of clarity, confidence with using social work theories and ability to manage competing demands, may occur later in the placement compared with a student on a traditional social work programme.

Supervision and time for reflection

Supervision must be viewed as protected time allowing students space to talk freely and reflect on the emotional impact of their work. Davys and Beddoe (2010) captured it well when they wrote

> Supervision can at very least allow, albeit briefly, the doors to be shut, the noise to be reduced and a quiet space for satisfying professional conversation. (p.87)

Morrison's (2005) 4x4x4 model of supervision is widely used within social care (SCIE, 2013) and is one of the models taught as part of the PE programme at X University. For Morrison, supervision is '..a process by

which one worker is given responsibility by the organisation to work with another worker(s) in order to meet certain organisational, professional and personal objectives which together promote the best outcomes for service users' (2005, p.32). When describing the functions of supervision, Morrison refers to one as being that of 'support', where the emotional aspects of the work are recognised and attended to.

Waterhouse et al (2011) found that workload pressure impacts on providing effective practice education in the statutory sector. Practice educators need a workload that allows them to have time to hold supervision sessions with their students where this emotional aspect of the work can be explored and strategies for coping and building resilience devised. This in line with what is stipulated in the PCF under 'professionalism' at the end of final placement stage: students with support should be able to '…take steps to manage and promote own safety, health, wellbeing, self-care and emotional resilience (BASW, 2018). This support function of supervision ensures students are learning in an environment that is supportive without being under undue stress and pressure where possible (Chui, 2009). Supervision should be a key opportunity for students to reflect on their practice experiences, the impact of these on their values and how their experiences fit with what they are learning at university. 'Training and supervision are seen as key to developing reflective practitioners' (Ferguson, 2018, p.417).

There is also a need for universities to consider how they can allow time and space for students to come together to discuss their placement experiences and what they are learning. At X placement tutorial group meetings occur fortnightly, bringing students together in small groups where they can discuss their experiences, present a case they are working on and gain peer and tutor support. These groups have been rated favourably by students in module evaluation forms, citing them as being a valuable space where they can 'vent' in a safe space and provide and receive support, something supported by the research of Collins et al (2008).

Ensuring students and practice educators are ready for the placement

While some students enjoyed the benefit of a clear break between their first and final placements, others did not due to having a delayed start to their first placement. The social work team at X have already responded to this

by making the two-week break between placements mandatory regardless of when the first placement ends. Allowing students time to 'switch off' for a clear period of time before beginning their final placement should at least in part, address the concerns that students had not 'recovered' after finishing their first placement.

Practice educators also need to be prepared for their role. As mentioned earlier in this paper, it is imperative that the workload of practice educators is reviewed and adjustments made, to ensure that they have the time available to complete the numerous tasks involved with supervising a student. This links back to the point previously made about practice educators being given full and clear information about what is involved as early as possible. In the case of trainee practice educators, this is particularly important when you consider that as well as having to manage their own caseload and oversee that of the student, they also have the demands of the academic work (at masters level) that needs to be submitted in order for them to qualify as practice educators. The author, as an academic delivering practice education courses and as a qualified and active practice educator herself, can attest to the difficulty of managing these competing tasks.

Conclusion

Much has been written and debated about FT social work courses and there are differing opinions on what sort of social workers they produce (Smith, 2013 and Maxwell et al, 2016). Despite the differences of opinion, it appears that FT courses are here to stay. Frontline, an independent FT social work training provider has recently been given a £45 million contract extension by the Department for Education to train 900 social workers (Community Care online, 2019), and Brindle (2018) has noted that '…about one in four newly qualified social workers will next year come via a fast-track route', (Guardian newspaper, online). In this very study, one of the 14 trainees had themself been trained via a FT programme - a scenario that will no doubt be seen more frequently as FT courses continue to expand and increase in popularity. While it was not the aim of this paper to comment on the type of social worker FT courses produce, the author would state that this must surely be in part influenced by the practice educators who supervise and assess them.

This small-scale study has provided a snapshot of the experiences of

14 trainee practice educators supervising social work students on a FT programme in X. Based on the findings, emerging recommendations have been presented about what is needed to enable practice educators to successfully undertake their role with FT students. The recommendations are summarised under the themes of: support 'tired' students , practice educators having a clear understanding of their students' FT course, the need for supervision to be seen as protected time where students are encouraged and enabled to reflect on the emotional aspects of their work, and lastly, ensuring students and practice educators are ready for the placement, with a particular need for trainee practice educators being given a workload conducive to the demands of their role.

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