Back to School for social work students: Developing quality practice learning opportunities in schools

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Summary: *Every Child Matters: Change for children* (DfES, 2004) places effective inter-professional working at the top of the child care agenda. Developing new opportunities for practice learning in different professional settings, therefore, is high on the agenda for all those concerned with the teaching of social work. Learning within a different professional setting can bring many benefits, but also challenges. This article outlines a well-established project in Hull, where student social workers have been experiencing practice learning opportunities in mainstream schools for the past four years. The project has been evaluated using an action research model and as such reflects the subsequent development and consolidation as the project has expanded. We highlight both the benefits and the challenges for all those concerned with these placements, addressing some of the issues for students, practice teachers, and work-based supervisors in their roles in this new approach.

Keywords: schools; inter-professional working; social work students; practice teachers; practice learning opportunities; social, emotional and behavioural problems in schools

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The changing context of practice learning

The emphasis on the importance of practice learning in the new degree in social work has sent out fresh challenges to all those involved in providing, supporting and assessing practice learning. Not only do universities need to provide more opportunities for students in practice learning, but the world of social work and social care is undergoing a period of fundamental change in the way services are provided and accessed (see, for example, DfES, 2002, 2003, 2005). The students themselves of course are also often aware of being sent out into new territory or of being the 'guinea pigs' as these changes in approach are beginning to emerge. Certainly there appears to be fewer 'traditional' placement providers, particularly in the statutory child care teams, and increasingly a plethora of potential opportunities in smaller voluntary or independent sector settings, or within new initiatives where different professionals are beginning to work together in an integrated approach. In many of these, social work itself may not be the 'lead' profession. The need to re-think and re-evaluate what constitutes an appropriate placement for social workers in training has to address the issue of whether the placement setting will enable students to develop and evidence their knowledge and skills according to the National Occupational Standards (TOPSS, 2002).

One area that has remained largely untapped as a source of practice learning for social workers is working within schools. School placements may not be completely new to those seeking placement opportunities; indeed in Hull both universities providing social work education in the city have made occasional and ad hoc placements within schools or pupil referral units (PRUs) over the years. However, they were exactly that – ad hoc, uncoordinated and generally not viewed as a potential source for innovative and challenging learning opportunities, particularly suited to the new emphasis on inter-professional learning and working. It was the dovetailing of a number of both concerns, and visions for the future that formed the kernel of what has now become a significant and coordinated source of practice learning for social work students in Hull. In many ways the development of the project preceded the 'sea of change' that has been evident in the past 3 years in particular through, for example, *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003), the *National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services* (DoH, 2004), and indeed the demands of the new degree itself, with the increased emphasis upon practice based learning.

The development of schools placements in Hull

As a city, Hull has been struggling for many years with the effects of social exclusion and social disadvantage in many of its schools' catchment areas. Secondary schooling in particular has featured near the bottom of government league tables (Audit Commission, 2003, 2004), and schools have increasingly expressed concern about the amount of teachers' time that is being spent on addressing the emotional and behavioural problems of children. Indeed several schools in the city had been pioneering new approaches and initiatives to help address these problems. Concerns included the number of exclusions, levels of bullying, youth crime, truancy, emotional and behavioural problems, supporting children with special educational needs, and supporting children 'looked after'. Hull Learning Services were also concerned to actively support initiatives that would offer more holistic approaches to working to support the educational achievement of children and young people in schools. Of course these issues and concerns are common ones throughout our education system and have been reflected accordingly in the literature for a number of years (Parker et al, 2003; Vulliamy and Webb, 2001, 2002; Nias, 1999; Blyth, 2002).

These concerns were also recognised by social services, and the providers of social work education in the city, the universities of Hull and Lincoln respectively. The latter were keen to increase the number of high quality placement opportunities available to students, and could see the potential for schools as a base for offering opportunities for students to develop their core skills, while at the same time providing services that could be of direct and immediate benefit to children and young people.

Discussions were opened in 2001 at strategic and grass roots levels to explore how practice learning in schools could be developed and supported appropriately. A Steering Group was set up, comprising initially senior officers in all the partner agencies, enabling joint understanding of, and commitment to, the project from the outset. Collaboration at strategic level has been identified as a crucial factor in effective inter-professional working (Weinstein et al, 2003), and indeed has proved to be so in the schools project. As the project has developed the Steering Group has typically been comprised of people nearer to the organisation and delivery of the project itself – representatives from the two universities (including the two placement coordinators), practice

teachers, and representatives from social services and education. The first placements were introduced in 2002 with only 12 students undertaking placements in both primary and senior schools. The numbers have grown each year as more schools have expressed interest in taking a student and as the capacity to offer placements to several students at one time has developed. The project is now in its fourth year, with more than 50 placements having been undertaken.

The project's aims were three-fold and incorporated the concerns and needs of each agency:

• To develop a range of high quality practice placement learning experiences for social workers in training;
• To develop and strengthen an inter-agency and multi-professional approach to practice learning;
• To improve and enhance services for children, young people and their families

These aims have been consistently maintained throughout the development of the project.

Before the first placements began it was felt that the project would benefit from continuing evaluation of how far the placements met these aims. An action research evaluation was set up to monitor and feedback the issues arising during the first two years of the project. Each of the participants in the first wave of placements completed a questionnaire and underwent an interview, as well as being invited to attend various workshops and local conferences. Further questionnaires were sent out in the third year in order to continue to monitor the themes and issues arising. These have been followed up with semi-structured interviews for all parties involved and focus groups for the student participants, thus gathering greater depth of information about the placement experiences from a cross section of perspectives. It has been a feature of the project, and indeed the research, that as key messages and issues have become evident, these have been fed back into the Project Steering Group, and further disseminated to the key participants through conferences and Project Reports (Wilson and Hillison, 2003, 2005). As such some of the more immediate issues arising have been able to be explored, and procedures or practice adjusted to ensure placements were strengthened for the next students.

To date, the majority of students who have been based in a schools

placement have been able to successfully meet their practice learning requirements, although some students have spent more time than anticipated in the local child care team as a means of covering perceived gaps in learning opportunities. In a few placements, students negotiated completion of their practice learning in a different setting due to particular difficulties emerging. The reasons for the non-completion of these placements has been varied, some have reflected wider concerns or themes about the nature of schools placements, whilst others have been more idiosyncratic and individual.

Some of the key themes emerging will be explored below, particularly in relation to the roles of the key participants. In general, however, it has been clear that in the majority of the placements there have been ample and appropriate learning opportunities to meet the requirements of both first and final level practice placements.

The 'Hull Model'

It was recognised from the outset that the enthusiasm, creativity and commitment of all parties was crucial if agencies were going to work together effectively to achieve new models of inter-professional practice learning. It was also accepted that additional measures would be needed to support this potential wave of new learning opportunities, with a view that eventually schools placements for social work students would become part of the mainstream provision of statutory placements on offer.

The 'model' essentially comprises four inter-related components: the student; the school-based supervisor (or mentor); the off-site practice teacher; and a 'link' social worker in the child care team. The school-based supervisor is responsible for the day- to-day support, supervision and management of the placement, identifying and helping to negotiate appropriate learning opportunities within the school. The off-site practice teacher, in addition to their responsibility to provide regular supervision, is responsible for the overall assessment of the student as well as providing a significant teaching and support role. They also provide a key coordinating role in relation to the placement participants and ensure the full range of learning opportunities can be met within the 'model'. The social work 'link' in the 'local' child care team plays a

key role in negotiating the provision of a limited degree of additional learning opportunity within their team, providing the student with some experience of the functioning, legal frameworks, and thresholds of statutory services.

The Universities' roles in the placements vary and mirror their overall approach to contact with students whilst on placements. One university provides placement tutors who visit the placement at least once as a matter of course, whilst the other provides additional support only if the placement is undergoing particular difficulties.

The learning opportunities students have engaged with have been wide-ranging. Examples include work with individual pupils (eg. emotional support and advice; extra support for pupils with additional needs; anger management programmes); group work around specific issues (e.g. social and behavioural problems; 'circle time'); work with families (home/school links; 'drop-ins' for parents); assessments; and making links with other agencies. Working on bullying issues has been a common theme, as has work around building self-esteem. Both of these have been well documented as key factors in the underachievement of young people at school, as well as being significant factors in their emotional well-being (Daniel and Wassell, 2002; Mosley, 2002; Whitted and Dupper, 2005). One student produced a pupil survey on bullying, for example, whilst many others reported working individually and in groups around bullying issues. In one primary school a student contributed towards developing a 'peaceful playtimes' initiative, and another to a 'Worry Box' scheme whereby primary pupils could anonymously give voice to their concerns.

One student stated '*I have had the opportunity to work with some of the most challenging students, with our work centred around reducing exclusions*'. Others offered 'drop-ins' to parents / carers, with an emphasis on early intervention and preventative work. One of the overall aims of schools in the project was to reduce the amount of time teachers spent dealing with social, emotional and behavioural problems, and there were many examples offered by the participants of how the impact of this was beginning to be felt. Schools in particular were able to identify the benefits of having additional support / access to services available within the school, helping to reduce the stigma often perceived to be attached to seeking help direct from statutory children and families services. Local childcare teams are beginning to report a significant reduction in 'inappropriate' referrals from schools, with students picking up and

working with less acute problems. Schools themselves are commenting on having more 'follow through' when referrals are made, with the student acting as a key link in the communication chain, and enabling a more consistent approach or package of support for a child/ family. Some students were also able to provide additional support to children 'looked after' by the local authority (e.g. those placed in foster care or in children's homes under the provision of the Children Act 1989), and to those with special educational needs. *'I feel this has been an excellent placement ... I have developed my understanding of childhood development as well as now having knowledge of working within education and children's legislation' (student).* (Wilson and Hillison, 2005, p.14).

The experiences and issues arising for the participants

The student

All students complete a placement application form and specify any particular areas of work that interest them, or indeed any particular placement that they would wish to prioritise. As such, it is built into the system that no student would go to a schools placement if they were not interested in doing so. In the first year of the project, some of the finalising of the early placements was rather rushed and a few students reported that they felt unclear and unprepared for what a schools placement might entail. For some this did impact on the ultimate satisfaction they gained from the placement, although others became very enthusiastic and could see the potential for very innovative and relevant learning opportunities. As the project has developed the information arising from the evaluation has enabled prospective students to be much better informed about the nature of a school placement. For example, in one of the universities, prior to their completion of placement request forms, over 50 students elected to attend an information workshop on schools placements. It is now not unusual for students to cite a schools placement as a preferred option.

However, one of the factors associated with successful schools placements that emerged early on was around the skills and personal qualities that students bring with them to a schools placement. Many of the placements, especially in the first two years as the project

was establishing itself, depended to a degree on the pro-activity and creativity of the student. Other qualities that both students and other participants in the project identified as being important were an outgoing personality, assertiveness, and an ability to work independently. It has not been appropriate to 'cherry pick' particular students to go into school placements, but it has been necessary on occasion, during the placement allocation process, to have wider discussion with tutors as to the suitability of some students to this kind of environment. That said, a wide variety of students have undertaken the placements and some more reserved, less outgoing students have done equally well. Several students have experienced placements where more than one social work student has been present for all or part of the placement. This has been particularly the case in some of the multi-agency support teams (MASTs) and Behaviour and Educational Support teams (BESTs). This has enabled students to derive additional support from each other and to work together on projects, with the potential of having greater impact on the school. Several of the schools now have sequential placements, with students being able to carry on the work of previous students, serving to embed projects more effectively within the school's provision of support.

An important issue for some students was what to do when they observed or were confronted with what they would deem to be 'poor practice' in schools, or where they encountered examples of conflicts in professional values. Often this would depend on how supportive and informed the school-based supervisor was, and what their position was within the hierarchy of the school system. Practice teachers also raised this as an issue, stressing the importance of students wherever possible being able to access other professional links on the school site (eg. multi-agency teams, or BESTs). The role of the practice teacher as an intermediary or advocate for the student was sometimes crucial in these situations. However, it remains a potential difficulty, and indeed two students left a secondary school placement early on in the first year of the project because they felt the professional differences were too great and that they were not being allowed full enough access to relevant learning opportunities. In this case the follow-up with the school highlighted their own acknowledgement that they were under-prepared for the demands of social work placements, but also an expression of their commitment to future placements when a BEST team would be introduced. Subsequent placements at the school have been very successful.

The school-based supervisor/mentor

Several factors needed to be acknowledged in order to provide the support, and quality of placement experience, that social work students would need in these, essentially, 'alien' practice contexts. Schools needed to commit to providing a 'supervisor' or 'mentor' on site, who would be responsible for day-to-day supervision and identification of appropriate learning opportunities. Nothing new in this, of course, but what was a source of challenge was that the supervisors often had little previous direct experience of working at the interface with the social work profession. As a result, they had little knowledge of the professional training requirements, or any direct involvement in the provision of social care services. In terms of their own profession of course, many supervisors were very experienced teachers, some with additional responsibility for pastoral, special needs and/or child protection within their schools. Some indeed had experience of supporting PGCE students on placement, but it was important to ensure that the differences in learning needs were made clear.

An additional challenge for the project was how teaching staff acting as supervisors, faced with often unremitting demands on their time during the school day, would be able to find sufficient time to provide the degree of support and supervision that social work students would need. It is also evident that there is little common understanding between the two professions of what constitutes 'supervision'. The experience of students in this respect was clearly differential, and is an area that continues to be addressed within the project.

The feedback we received from school supervisors through questionnaires and interviews has been varied. Some have clearly enjoyed the challenge of having a student from a different professional background, and have been able to identify good learning opportunities for the student, and provided relevant induction and support. Some clearly felt, however, that they did not have sufficient understanding of the professional requirements of social work training, and although supplied with the standard practice placement /portfolio documentation, often commented that it was too detailed and was couched in language that was 'jargonistic'. As such the practice teachers have tended to take on the primary role of ensuring that learning opportunities have 'fitted' with the requirements. The request for a simplified, user-friendly document, has not yet been addressed explicitly, as this is an issue that could be

said to apply to other placements where supervisors are similarly less familiar with the requirements. This becomes, therefore, a wider issue for the universities to consider. However, as a direct result of early feedback to the project, a Schools Placement Handbook has been devised that identifies the key roles and responsibilities of each participant, highlighting possible areas of work students could engage in.

Some school-based supervisors identified that they felt unprepared for their role, with little understanding of the project, its aims and potential. In the initial stages of the project, university placement coordinators worked hard to explore the purpose and scope of the project with key staff of participating schools. Nonetheless, as the project developed there was a tendency in some schools to delegate the task of supervision and mentoring to others who had not necessarily understood the role. Moreover, some students, and indeed practice teachers, have noted that the task of school supervisor has sometimes been passed into the hands of staff who do not have any kind of professional qualification (for example, some family support workers or learning mentors). This has on occasion added to the confusion about role, adequacy of supervision, and accountability. It is clear that this is potentially a significant quality assurance issue, with the ultimate responsibility lying with the universities to ensure that placements meet a required standard in terms of the supervisor / mentor role, and indeed of the learning opportunities available.

The 'off site' practice teacher

Traditionally the model of an off-site practice teacher has offered the opportunity for innovative and non-traditional placements to be developed as valuable and appropriate learning opportunities for social work students. Lawson (1998) suggests that the experience and knowledge of the off-site teacher 'provides an essential anchoring point in otherwise uncharted territories' (p.238). The breadth of experience off-site practice teachers bring with them can be a very positive component for the student in terms of the teaching, support, and negotiating of appropriate learning opportunities.

In terms of the school placements, it was recognised from the outset that students could not be fully supported and assessed within the school setting. A small group of experienced off-site practice teachers were

identified and remained closely involved with the project throughout the first three years. Each also had some previous experience of education systems (as teachers, schools governors, learning mentors) so that they were able to bring to the model a good understanding of the professional culture and values of educational settings. This proved to be crucial in terms of helping to 'translate' the learning requirements of social work into the opportunities available within schools. It was, however, unsustainable to rely so heavily on such a small group, with consequent difficulties around overload. As the project has grown, however, other off-site practice teachers have become involved and further training has been provided to explore with them the particular challenges that school placements bring for them in their role.

Some of the issues and difficulties faced by the off-site practice teachers have not been easily resolved and remain areas for negotiation and clarification. For example, there are clear differences in professional cultures and priorities. Sometimes these can be discussed and negotiated so that each participant can contribute their own expertise in a way that will strengthen the support offered to children and young people within schools. At other times the differences can seem to hinder or contradict the work that each is trying to achieve. When, for example, a student social worker is trying to work on self-esteem or issues of behaviour management with a pupil, they sometimes find that the way the young person is later addressed or treated in class undermines the progress they have made. These are difficult issues for any one practice teacher to tackle in the school. Such fundamental differences in approach, when they do occur require much longer-term work exploring and understanding issues with the schools and between professions. One could argue that the more entrenched attitudes around some teaching styles will only really be addressed as professional training itself includes an increasingly inter-professional emphasis, with the teaching of core values across all professionals working within the provision of services to children and families. *The Common Core of Skills and Knowledge for the Children's Workforce* (DfES, 2005) provides a framework on which to build the basis of such a shared foundation.

As within any 'off-site' teaching and assessing arrangements the dynamics of the 'three-way' relationship can be facilitative or potentially undermining for the student (Lawson, 1998). Lawson explores the potential for either 'inclusion' or 'exclusion' of the different parties. In schools placements there are additional facets to this: a practice teacher

could feel very uncomfortable going into a school, perceiving it as a loud and possibly even hostile environment, with little facility for quiet and reflective supervision. The school supervisor could feel under threat as their professional value and practice base comes under close scrutiny and possible challenge in a way it has not before. The school itself could indeed become defensive. As one school reported *'Your students keep going on about "empowerment" …'*, this being reported on a day when the school was facing a particular crisis in discipline.

The Social Services 'Link' worker

The introduction of a 'link' social worker in a local childcare team was aimed at enriching and supporting schools placements in several ways.

It was acknowledged from the outset that social work students in schools could feel extremely isolated professionally and be overwhelmed by the issues they faced. It was also recognised that they would need to develop a sense of distinct professional identity, and not be subsumed into becoming a classroom assistant, or as one student later put it *'if there was a degree for leaf rubbing, I think I would get top marks!'* It was envisaged that a strong connection with a field social worker would give the student the opportunity to discuss social work perspectives and approaches.

It was additionally envisaged at the outset that not all of the practice requirements might be met from the learning opportunities within the school itself, and that accordingly the childcare team could offer various additional opportunities. This process was to be open to individual negotiation, but typically it entailed the student being based at the childcare team during school holidays, and sometimes working with the team on a more regular basis. In a minority of school placements, where there appeared to be difficulties in identifying or accessing appropriate learning opportunities, students spent increasing amounts of time within the childcare team. Whilst on the one hand this enabled the placement to be completed successfully, it also burdened the link social worker with more responsibility and time commitment than they had envisaged.

Those social workers who have taken on the role of 'links' have typically been experienced workers but without practice teaching

accreditation or substantial experience of supervision. The role has allowed them to 'dip their toes' in practice teaching without an onerous degree of responsibility. It is envisaged that many of these staff will go on to develop their teaching and mentoring skills through the nationally recognised Post Qualifying Practice Teacher's Award, or, as this award is phased out, through the new Specialist Awards under the revised Post-Qualifying Framework (GSCC, 2005). It also, of course, provides an opportunity for them to fulfil the requirements for ongoing registration as qualified social workers (GSCC Codes of Practice).

One of the aims of the project has been to promote inter-professional learning and working. The potential for closer links to be forged between schools and their local childcare teams, through the working out of this project, is, we feel, a yet underdeveloped aspect of the model. There have certainly been encouraging examples of better communication between schools and child care teams, and some examples of more consistent approaches being adopted to support children in need and children looked after. Students have frequently been part of inter-agency meetings and have contributed to assessments and child protection plans. However, in some areas the links remain weak, with the learning opportunities within the childcare teams being seen as distinct from the work being done in the schools. It was not intended that the time students spent in the child care team would constitute a 'split site' arrangement, but that appropriate links could be made between the work of both the school and the social work team to improve the support and services offered to children and their families. Further workshops and training for the school-based supervisors and childcare links are being planned to facilitate a more 'joined up' and effective approach in this respect.

The service-user perspective

Throughout the evaluation of the project we have been looking at evidence of how schools placements are fulfilling one of the aims of the project, namely to improve services to children, young people and their families. In many ways this is, of course, the central and most important aim. If having social work students in schools makes no impact on the experiences and achievements of children then it would all be in vain. It has been a source of constant discussion between the

various participants as to how they can achieve appropriate and helpful feedback about the work and services they have been offering. Some students have sought direct feedback from parents (eg. from users of drop-in services) or from children and young people taking part in group sessions. In such instances, typical comments are that the most significant thing is that someone has been available, and has been able to spend time listening to their problems. Some children have avoided exclusions, whilst others have achieved sufficient improvement in the management of their behaviour that they have been able to fully integrate into mainstream classes again.

Anti-bullying strategies have been strengthened, and examples of specific support to individual children (around aspects of special educational need, for example) have been very evident. Both local police and social service teams have reported reductions in referrals, suggesting that a preventative impact is being achieved. This is particularly significant and encouraging in a climate where there is the potential for dilution of professional identities and expertise, and where the future of social work may increasingly be seen as only being relevant at the 'hard end' of child protection, or the statutory provision for children looked after and adoption.

It is interesting to note that many of the benefits highlighted in our evaluation are mirrored in the findings from developments in New Zealand, where social workers have been recruited and placed in schools since 1999 (Ministry of Social Development, 2002). Despite significant differences in the approach, both projects emphasise the potential for preventative work, breaking down barriers between the providers of services and local communities. Findings clearly point to the potential for social workers to assist in the process of change and in the tackling of social exclusion. However, it is acknowledged that it is not possible to fully evaluate the longer-term impact on young people or their families while a programme is still in its infancy. The New Zealand work also notes the difficulties that can be faced through professional isolation, and this has been a key focus of the project in Hull.

In many of the schools participating in the project there are other initiatives besides the placement of social workers. In one school there has been a Multi-agency Support Team (MAST) for several years, with the secondment of a full-time social worker. BEST teams have also provided additional opportunities to work with professionals from other agencies. The student social workers often feed into the work of these

teams, strengthening existing projects, as well as being instrumental in developing new approaches. It is difficult therefore to isolate the impact of student placements as a discreet factor in the improvements and changes being achieved. Given the potentially transitory funding of such initiatives, and the solution focussed style of practice, it is also hard to predict the longer-term effects on schools and the young people themselves, although the immediate benefits for young people are evident. The teams themselves also provide an excellent 'home base' for the accessing of appropriate learning opportunities for the student social worker.

Although individual students can make a difference to individual children, a different kind of research and evaluation activity is required to identify the longer-term effects on such trends as: exclusion and truancy rates; the reporting and management of youth crime or bullying; stronger links to child care teams; and better support to looked after children. This will be developed in the near future.

Conclusions

The schools project in Hull has been an exciting and challenging venture for all the participants and stakeholders over the last four years. The initial enthusiasm of the schools has not abated, with more schools wanting to participate. It has not always been possible, though, to supply enough students to the project to fill the demand. Quality assurance, in terms of ensuring new schools are adequately prepared for providing and supervising the learning opportunities for social work students, remains an ongoing challenge for the Steering group.

There has been ample evidence to date of both the feasibility and benefits of schools placements in providing a source of appropriate practice learning for social workers. Certain difficulties, however, have emerged, especially during the first year of placements, and where possible these have been addressed and clearer procedures and principles built into subsequent placements. Other challenges require a longer-term approach and consistent re-visiting of the basic elements of the project. Ways of strengthening the model are continually being considered; for example, additional resources are being allocated from one of the university practice placement teams, and the local Practice Learning Centre (PLC), to offer

further support and consolidation to the key participants. In particular, the focus will be on strengthening and clarifying roles with the aim of exploring further the potential for more effective collaboration between schools and statutory child care services.

In what ways, we have sometimes been asked, is this project different from the development of other non-traditional practice learning placements? Certainly, there are common themes and similarities: a clear need for the recruitment of off-site practice teachers; the additional demands of establishing good communication between all parties and clarity of their roles; the need to fully identify and explore what constitutes appropriate learning opportunities; adequate preparation for the student and the placement setting, comprehensive, well-thought out induction programmes. These are the elements of good practice in any placement and have certainly been of great significance in this project. However, the differences in 'professional' language, expectations, and culture between social work and education remain key challenges. The same might be true of other non-traditional placements; working in health or prison settings, for example. However, as is emphasised in the Practice Learning Taskforce Report (2005), the National Occupational Standards (TOPSS 2002) are expressed at a generic and general level, thus making it theoretically easier for non-traditional settings to contemplate offering learning opportunities. Nevertheless, 'working it out' in such different professional cultures and settings requires mutual commitment and energy. It takes time, both locally and nationally to bring to effect shifts in culture and understanding. We have recognised, for example, the significance in the short term of individual relationships and personalities in building successful collaboration, or conversely, indeed, their potential for undermining the aims of the project. These are important factors in any attempts to work collaboratively, but there must also be more fundamental shifts in attitudes and mutual understanding, with structures in place to facilitate change and progress.

Many of the recent government initiatives will undoubtedly help to take that agenda forward. Clearly, schools placements are firmly on the map in Hull, and it is evident that a number of other regions and universities are considering developing similar opportunities. Locally the project has begun to make significant development into a neighbouring authority, which has adopted a slightly different approach. As a national 'pathfinder' for Children's Trusts, it has been developing family support services that have very much closer integration with school provision.

In such instances some of the difficulties that have been faced by Hull students (eg. access to professional support; consistency and continuity between education and social workers in the support of children and families) have been lessened. With the rolling out of integrated children's services, particularly the location of children's centres, it will make it easier for social work students to focus their learning experience on a school setting whilst at the same time having fuller access to other related services and professionals. The development of Extended Schools (2002) should also provide further opportunity for quality learning experiences for social work students, as services are developed that meet the needs of local communities, including services that are provided at weekends, evenings, and during school holidays. However, it is not anticipated in Hull that these new practice learning opportunities will detract from actual schools placements themselves. The basic principles of the schools project as it was conceived, and as it has developed, focuses essentially on the potential supportive and preventative benefits to children, young people and their families from the close, daily working together within, and from, the school environment itself.

The challenge for the Schools project will be to keep abreast of the changes and adapt the model accordingly. However, the foundation that has been built will undoubtedly place all participants in a stronger position to embrace the demands, benefits and challenges of integrated service provision and effective inter-professional working.

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