

# Editorial

## *Aspects of the Dickensian corpus: A metaphor for social work practice education*

Taking three well-known Dickens' titles (*A Christmas Carol*, *Hard Times* and *Great Expectations*) as a starting point is apt for a contemporary consideration of practice teaching in social work education in the UK, although these musings are relevant across countries and across professional disciplines, for a number of reasons. Firstly, the titles themselves demonstrate the potential polarities in what is happening in many of our areas. Secondly, Dickens' narrative mastery of triumph through adversity resonates with our desire for the underdog or the disenfranchised and hurt, in this case practice teaching in social work, to succeed against all the odds. Thirdly, parts of the narrative of these books provide us with allusions and metaphors that help us describe the contemporary situation and resist and redevelop.

I shall start and end with a story of hope, change, and challenge. Rather like the ghost of Jacob Marley, the Social Work Task Force and Reform Board in England have alerted the Government to the need for change, development and a generosity of spirit in practice learning – a system rooted in partnership that allows each area to undertake its allotted role and task.

In the UK, the tensions between field education/practice learning and academic learning are keenly felt and the need for collaborative working is again high on the agenda. Nationally, and internationally, the need for research in this area is promoted with the hope that Ebenezer Scrooge -located within practice agencies and universities - will finally recognise the need to conflate aspects of theoretical and practice-based learning and develop generous, critically analytic and deep thinking practitioners.

### ***Hard Times***

Outcome and output driven standards have taken firm hold in social work education as they have in practice settings and the ramifications of overtly competence based approaches to education have taken firm hold and seen as ends in themselves. Perhaps social work is now beginning to assert authority and promote the process and 'soul' of practice teaching reflecting Gradgrind's evolution from utilitarian principles to those based more on virtue and humanity.

### ***Great Expectations***

Practice teaching in social work may have had, like Pip in the story, humble beginnings and been marginalised in education settings and in practice but provided for in often hidden ways, finding supporters and detractors sharing many traits and leaving practice learning in a state of distress like Pip when treated so cruelly by Estella. Now, like a returning Magwitch under pressure from the authorities, higher education is highly supportive of practice learning and practice teaching working to ensure it is core to education, respected and resourced whilst education itself has suffered at the hands of government review, professional body review and the media. Will Pip and Estella walk hand in hand away at the end?

Hard times continue for social work and education in times of global recession. The funding for placements in England is under review and changes are being sought to ensure that any new funding arrangements maximise the quality placements and reward and support them. The details are not yet forthcoming but this may be an issue for many agencies who rely on this income and may find themselves in steep competition for it. Inadvertently, this could reduce placement opportunities still further! This is happening at a time of increased demands for student places echoing success in the UK at attracting a greater number of students. For instance, there were in 2008-09 5,793 students registered against 5,452 in 2007-08. This created an increased demand for student placements: 13,718 were required in 2008-09 against 12,698 in 2007/08. The General Social Care Council (the professional registration body responsible for social work in England) believed the fact that placements were secured is positive but also recognised continuing problems with placement provision:

It is possible to conclude from the data that HEIs have overall become better at setting up and managing sufficient placements at a time when employer capacity for placement provision has come under considerable strain. The importance of robust and sustainable HEI-employer partnerships... is highlighted. (GSCC, 2010, p. 7)

However, in their report 13 HEIs felt compelled to use placements they would rather not, whilst only 0.8% of placements failed to meet university quality assurance standards. The GSCC highlight other problems such as the low calibre of entrants to the profession, increasing expectations of employers, a lack of partnership working and ill-preparation of students by universities for social work practice.

This certainly runs counter to research that we have undertaken in which the perceptions of 22 newly qualified social workers based in statutory settings were reported (Bates et al., 2010). The perspectives of line managers, people who use services and carers were discussed. Given time and funding restrictions, data were collected over a period of nine months. Participants were asked to complete three questionnaires; one at the beginning, one at the middle and one at the end of their first year in employment. Some questions were repeated in each questionnaire to allow for comparability.

Findings from the research suggested that the social work degree in England was well received by most newly qualified social workers and highlighted the perceived importance of a statutory placement. Key social work practice skills that require further development were identified. Placements are an important and valued way to bridge the academic and practice world. Whilst most of the newly qualified social workers in our study thought that a statutory placement was very important, not all had this learning opportunity.

It could be suggested that it is the thinking skills and ability to deal with issues of diversity, and to a lesser extent complexity, that social workers gain from the degree. Whether or not degree programmes should focus on the development of practical skills such as making a court appearance is, perhaps, a matter for discussion. A quarter of the newly qualified social workers identified that their current development needs included assessment, report writing, record keeping, time management, case management, dealing with conflict and care management and contracting. These findings raise questions about the nature and content of social work education at qualifying level. Dialogue and partnership between practice agency and academe need to be emphasised.

Over recent years there has been an increased demand on practice agencies to provide placements with the number of required days rising from 130 to 200 days and increase of nearly 40% in students. This has caused great strain, particularly within the local authority statutory sector and has led to outrage by some reviewers when social workers have been offered placements where there are no trained social workers '*[t]hese included placements in schools and GP surgeries*' (House of Commons Children and Families Committee, 2009, p. 48). This is despite the encouragement that was primarily afforded to universities in using and developing innovative and non-standard placements. This also runs counter to moves to remove the imperative for local authorities to report on the numbers of placements provided and to continue to see social work placements as good will rather than an integral part of the role of the profession.

Recommendations from a recent Government committee indicated that training should be seen as core part of social work task and fundamental responsibility of employers and should once again be reported in performance frameworks. Centrally driven workforce planning should be introduced for determining the numbers of placements a local authority should commit to which should be agreed in partnership before intakes. The funding should be reviewed to reflect the true cost and allocated to formal partnerships of universities and employers rather than passed on.

The Social Work Task Force suggests reform based on 'partnership' with all parts of the system; developing understanding over time. Two of the core building blocks involved are: 'high quality appropriate initial training' and on-going training and development.

Current arrangements for education, training and career progression are not producing... enough social workers suited to the full demands of frontline practice. There is simply not enough shared understanding about the division of responsibilities in education and training among higher education institutions, employers and social workers themselves. (Social Work Task Force, 2009, p.63)

There is a lack of consensus about the purpose of initial education and training and NQSWs are expected to take on increasingly complex tasks unlike other professions. The environments in which NQSWs are placed are often fraught and difficult.

There seems to be a 'vicious circle' in which staff shortages limit the capacity of employers to engage with universities in delivering high quality placements. This would address some of the concerns raised about the quality of teaching and delivery – levels of understanding of some educators

about the demands of frontline practice, how theory is applied to practice, and the quality of university assessment. It will also give practice educators clear responsibilities to prepare student social workers adequately for practice.

There remains a strong consensus that provision of high quality placements is centrally important in preparing students for entering the workforce. Working groups supporting the Reform Board are developing the implementation plan for the recommendations arising from the Social Work Task Force and many have great expectations in respect of the process. The Education sub-group of the Reform Board will make recommendations to inform the agenda on the feasibility, risks and timescales for the recommendations relating to education matters; number 3 relates to *new arrangements to provide sufficient high quality practice placements for all social work students*.

There is a large body of work concerning practice learning in social work, that element of education that takes place and seeks to develop competence and confidence in practice. The terms employed to describe it are also various – ‘practice learning’, ‘placement’, ‘field education’ representing some of the major ones, and are used interchangeably throughout this covering statement whilst recognising the current preferred UK term is practice learning. Much of the literature is US in origin. However, homogeneity in experience, purpose and delivery cannot be assumed across the States let alone internationally. There is also a significant amount of grey literature. The literature, as a whole, is often concentrated in specialist academic journals relating to social work, pedagogy or learning in the realm of practice in particular.

A quick search of some key databases – Academic Search Premier, ASSIA, International Bibliography of the Social Sciences, Social Work Abstracts, Social Care Online - from 2000 to March 2009, using the search strings *practice learn\* or practice educ\* or field educ\* and social work* - identified 150 peer reviewed journal papers concerning practice learning or field education.

The majority of papers focusing on practice learning have been published in the USA. However, the UK comes second, followed by Canada and subsequently Australia with other countries publishing few. This profile suggests that practice learning or field education represents a predominantly Western social work education phenomenon which is important to consider as developing countries forge indigenous education and training programmes. It is also interesting that continental European papers are few.

Research into practice learning is important given the differential attention paid to it in different countries and cultures. Questions concerning its place and effectiveness in encouraging learning and competent practice are contingent on the country and under the regulations in which it is undertaken. It may be construed that practice learning both reflects and constructs the understanding of social work in that location. As the UK understanding of social work becomes more singularly focused on protection, safeguarding and statutory work, so too debates about some aspects of practice teaching becomes constrained and regulated.

The published papers concerning field education identified between 2000-2009 focused on two core areas reflecting a methodological approach that acknowledges the interconnections and reflexive influences between individual aspects of practice learning and structural and organisational concerns.

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The papers in this edition reflect some of the issues outlined above. They are social work specific as regards profession but represent models and ideas that can be refined or revised for use within a range of disciplines. Chui revisits some of the anxieties but great expectations that social work students have in respect of supervision during placement learning. The voice of the student as key participant is promoted within this paper.

Laycock, Walker and Heath consider a contested and yet topical area relating to practice educators who are not themselves qualified social workers. Whilst other professions than social workers may be more restrictive in who can 'sign off' students in practice, social work in the UK has accommodated itself to using a range of paraprofessionals and others in this regard. As changes are introduced and sought the question is raised again. In such an Interprofessional discipline we may usefully consider, examine and highlight the importance of others in the education of social workers, and maybe other professionals. Indeed, the importance of involving people who use social work and health services is increasingly recognised and yet their expertise derives not from professional accreditation but from experience.

The complex mix of those supporting students in practice learning is taken up by Mathews, Simpson, Croft, Lee and McKenna. Their paper looks at the students' perceptions of support from university tutors, practice team in the agency, other students and family and friends.

Pehrson, Panos, Larson and Cox examine variables of communication

within the supervisory relationship. This paper describes a study developing the use of a specific communication model to facilitate the process of learning through this relationship. The potential for further research and translation of the model to other areas of practice and profession and, indeed, to other cultures and countries is clear.

Blake examines the potential of practice learning for enhancing the sustainability agenda. The paper emphasises partnership working, a theme common to all developments and part of a continuing agenda for enhancing quality and sustainability of these experiences. The importance of involving 'citizens' who avail themselves of social services in the education of social work students is discussed further in McCafferty's paper. The educational impact of this work is considered and the lessons are easily translated into a collaborative environment in other countries.

The *Hard Times* are seen in the demands and continued need to enhance and assure quality whilst provide appropriate experiences. However, practice teachers enjoy *Great Expectations* recognising that practice education increases recruitment and retention potential, whilst providing opportunities to re-claim social work. To work towards an open-hearted generosity of spirit in active and meaningful partnerships, reflecting Scrooge's change, takes the involvement of us all to make it work.

**Professor Jonathan Parker**

## References

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