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Whose students are they anyway?

Could a difference in how practice organisations and higher education institutions perceive social work students be a barrier to collaboration when problems arise in placement?

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Abstract: This paper draws on case study research which explored the support needs of those involved in social work practice learning in an English local authority. Data was collected through questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews with 27 practice educators, students and team managers. Although issues relating to failing students were not intended as the primary focus of the research, this theme dominates the findings from practice educators and team managers. Practice educators cited problematic placements as a key factor in their decision not to continue in the role.

A significant contributory factor in the negative impact of the failing experience is the participants' dissatisfaction with the attitude and approach of the students' universities. Particularly striking is the perception that universities present an obstruction to a fail decision resulting in students being passed who possibly should not do so. This paper considers whether the different institutional perceptions of the social work student and the organisations' role in relation to them could be at the root of these difficulties in collaboration and fuel the 'failure to fail' debate.

Keywords: failing students; practice educators; university-practice partnerships; collaboration; practice placement

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Introduction

In 2008, whilst working as a local authority practice learning coordinator, I undertook a qualitative research project to consider the support needs of those involved in practice learning in a Local Authority organisation in London. In order to gain an overview, a case study approach to the research was taken (Yin, 1994) and data were gathered from a sample of the main stakeholders in practice learning in the organisation; students, practice educators and team managers. An impetus for the research had been to contribute to our knowledge of which aspects of practice learning might require support and where gaps existed in this support. It was hoped, amongst other things, this might provide ideas on how to stem the tide of practice educators discontinuing this role, a trend that had been well documented (Bell & Webb, 1992; Lindsay & Tompsett, 1998; Wilson, 2000; Furness et al., 2004). One theme to emerge strongly from the data gathered from practice educators and team managers was the significance of the impact of having a student who had failed or was at serious risk of doing so. Within this overarching theme a sub theme revealed the barriers to failing a student and the participants' perception of the role played in this by the students' universities.

Since undertaking the research I have moved from being a practice learning co-ordinator and freelance practice educator to a teacher of both postgraduate qualifying social work students and qualifying practice educators at a university, having for a period held both practice based and HEI positions simultaneously. It is this transition through the various domains of social work education that has encouraged me to revisit the findings of this research in the context of their multi-organisation positioning and to consider the implications they may have for the current landscape of social work education in the UK.

Background

Published research on failing or problematic social work placements remains limited (Parker, 2010). Where it does exist it indicates this to be a significant event, causing emotional repercussions not only for the student but the practice educator as well (Burgess et al., 1998; Sharpe, 2000; Sharpe & Danbury, 1999; Basnett & Sheffield, 2010; Finch, 2010; Furness, 2011).

The practice educators in Burgess et al.'s (1998) study expressed feelings of 'exhaustion, sadness, disappointment, anger, frustration, a sense of failure, guilt and a questioning of themselves'(56). These emotions are echoed in subsequent studies. Basnett & Sheffield (2010) describe practice educators suffering emotional distress, self-questioning and even physiological changes. Finch (2010) describes the 'stories' of practice educators in her narrative research which includes 'the angry story' (86) and 'the guilt story' (102) and a practice educator in Furness' (2011) study reported that failing a student was a 'stressful and isolating experience' (9).

In some of the literature the notion of failing to fail the student is bound up with this emotional stress. Sharpe (2000) makes a direct connection between the two phenomena by concluding that students were being 'shuffled through' (13) their placement as a way of avoiding having to manage the fail situation. Similarly Finch (2010) draws the conclusion that the emotional labour makes it difficult for practice educators to fail students. Despite this notion of failing to fail being discussed in the literature as an area of concern (Furness & Gilligan 2004; Shapton 2007; Parker 2010) there is little research into this in social work with research in nursing (Duffy, 2003) often used to inform the literature.

There is limited evidence about whether this does genuinely exist in social work education, how widespread the perception of its existence is and if it does exist, what exactly creates a barrier to a fail decision. There are, however, some indications in the literature that practice educators consider HEI processes to have some impact on this. A practice educator in Burgess et al.'s study (1998) questioned why it 'should require so much more work to fail a student than pass a student' (54). Similar frustration was indicated by a practice educator in Furness' (2011) study. This could be seen to be either a cause or a symptom of more general animosity expressed toward the HEI in both these studies and in that of Sharpe's (2000). Burgess (1998) highlighted that practice educators complained of HEIs withholding information about the students and 'abdicating' (11) the responsibility for removal of unsuitable students to practice educators. Some later research also provides a small amount of evidence of dissatisfaction with the HEI (Basnett & Sheffield, 2010; Furness, 2011) however this remains a little researched area.

Shapton (2007) approaches the failure to fail debate by considering the assessment process itself and differences between practice and academic positions suggesting solutions might be found in adopting the notion from Wenger (1998) of a community of practice incorporating all those

involved in practice education as well as the need for a critical review of the management of assessment.

Methods

The approach to the research was inductive with the intention of generating themes from the lived experiences of the participants themselves. It was largely qualitative with some quantitative elements within the questionnaires, although given the small numbers these cannot be considered statistically significant. A case study approach was taken as this 'investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context' (Yin, 2009: 18) and uses multiple sources of evidence to do so. As such, however, it makes no claims to being representative or generalisable though it is hoped that it will be informative to those experiencing similar phenomena elsewhere.

The research had two phases which comprised two different methods of data collection, questionnaires for the first phase and individual semi-structured interviews for the second. Twenty seven questionnaires were returned, comprising 15 Practice Educators (PEs), eight students and four Team Managers (TMs). The practice educators in the study had assessed a total of 37 students in the organisation. The fail events discussed in the interviews relate to students from at least three different universities minimising the chances of this being explained in terms of a single relationship with one university.

A different questionnaire was used for each stakeholder group to reflect their different position within the practice learning relationship. The questions comprised a mixture of multiple choice and open questions and were intended to generate responses about levels of satisfaction with the practice learning experience, the extent, sources and adequacies of support and views on what might be done differently. The questionnaires for practice educators and team managers additionally asked about intentions to provide further social work student placements and what might help or hinder this.

The second phase of the data collection was by semi-structured individual interview with the intention of exploring further some of the themes that had arisen from the questionnaires as well as obtaining a richer picture of

the participants' experiences of practice learning generally. A total of nine interviews were conducted, each approximately one hour long with three students, four practice educators and two team managers. Interviewees were selected from those who had indicated on their questionnaire that they were willing to participate. Of the practice educators PE1 had two students who had failed, PE2 one student who had failed and PE3 & 4 both had students who experienced significant difficulties and nearly failed but ultimately went on to pass the placements. Additional experiences of fails or near fails were, however, captured in the data due to questionnaire responses from practice educators who were not interviewed and to team managers relating their experience of fails or near fails within their teams over a number of years. There was a relatively even spread of participants from Adults and Children and Families social work services within the organisation. Two of the PE interviewees worked in different Children and Families services, one in an Adults service and one in Mental Health. The team managers participating had all previously been practice educators and considered themselves highly committed to having social work students in their teams.

Ethical considerations

Ethics approval was granted from both a university research ethics committee and the research ethics panel of the organisation within which the research was being conducted. As a member of that organisation and someone with a role in how practice learning was structured in the organisation, I was aware that I was, in a sense, part of the case being studied and may be seen as such by the participants. I therefore had to be mindful of this in my analysis of the data. It may have been that participants were more inhibited in sharing negative views on aspects of the organisational support than they would have been were an independent researcher used. Therefore any conclusions drawn must be done so with caution in this respect. The participants were given the option to submit the questionnaire anonymously although most chose not to do so.

Findings

For the purpose of this paper I will concentrate on findings which relate to failing students. This will therefore require a focus on the findings from practice educators and team managers as failed placements did not arise as a theme in any of the student responses. Therefore, by necessity, the student perspective is missing from this discussion and would be a valuable focus for future research.

Impact of failing and problematic placements on continuation of practice education

The questionnaire asked practice educators how likely they were to take another social work student at some point in the future and what factors would influence this decision. The question was posed to ascertain the sustainability of practice learning within the organisation, what emerged was an indication of the significance that having a failing student had on this decision. As in other social work agencies in the UK there was no requirement to undertake this role and the government performance indicator measuring placement provision in organisations had recently ceased thus continuation of the role was to a large extent a matter of personal preference. Although none ruled it out completely, only two out of thirteen respondents said they would definitely take another student. The fact that the majority of practice educators were ambivalent about continued involvement in practice learning indicates that there were dependant factors for them in making that decision. Whilst lack of time was the most frequently cited reason influencing the decision, a difficult experience with a previous student was cited as a significant factor by 6 of the 9 practice educators who responded to this question. Given that, unlike other factors, difficult experiences are not encountered by all practice educators, this indicates a high proportion of respondents. A link between cessation of practice teaching and failing students was further revealed in the interviews with practice educators and team managers. Three of the four practice educator interviewees said that difficult experiences with a student had made them re-consider practice education.

To be perfectly honest if I hadn't been doing the practice teachers award I don't think I would have had another student, I felt very demoralised. (PE1)

Well I haven't done any practice teaching since!.... I probably will do it again at some point but I think it just made me realise just how big an issue it can be. (PE2)

PE3 stated that her difficult experience with one student had 'definitely' influenced her decision not to continue practice teaching. Both team managers who were interviewed identified a similar impact on staff.

We've got an example in the team where someone who I think would be a fabulous practice teacher in lots of ways and she did take somebody but found the whole thing so difficult because they weren't easy that she will never do it again which is a shame. (TM1)

To be honest it put off two really good practice teachers... (name) will never have a student again nor will (name)... Yes it really puts people off, the stress is not worth it. (TM2)

The limitations of the sample size must be borne in mind here so this cannot be considered representative and indeed PE4 had not been deterred at all from practice education by her experience. However, it does add to other evidence in the literature, indicating a direct link for some between the failing experience and a withdrawal of involvement in practice learning (Basnett & Sheffield, 2010) Given the continued fragile state of the sufficiency of quality practice placements in the UK, acknowledging this link and exploring the reason for it forms a legitimate and necessary area for both academic and practice scrutiny. Basnett & Sheffield's (2010) findings in this respect indicate a connection between those practice educators ceasing the role and the HEIs lack of validation of their decisions. This has some resonance with this research with regard to the impact of the role of the HEI, however before exploring this aspect more fully, it is important to highlight the relationship found between time pressures and being a practice educator to a failing student. This demonstrates, I believe, that the impact of having a failing student is complex and multi-faceted and why it eludes simple diagnoses.

Common to other research (Bell & Webb, 1992; Wilson, 2000; Shardlow et al., 2002) managing the practice education role within the time available was a significant factor influencing the decision for practice educators whether to continue. It was also most commonly cited on the questionnaires as the least satisfying aspect of the role for practice educators with thirteen

of the fifteen making reference to it. In particular it was the time involved in managing the duality of the role of social worker and practice educator, 'Juggling own job and practice teaching responsibilities'; 'Balancing the demands of the student with your own workload'. During interviews, however, the initial response of all the practice educators to questions about time pressures was to make a distinction between having a student who was performing well and those who were not as the following comments illustrate

The major time issue was with the failing student (PE2)

Inevitably it's a lot of work.. you say it's like half a day a week but particularly if you've got a student that's struggling it's totally unrealistic... with my failing student it was taking up a minimum of half my working week (PE3)

I don't find it (time) a problem I think if you've got a goodish student who just kind of gets on with it.... it's much easier than someone who's hard work (PE4)

It is the following comment by PE1 that gives some explanation of the complexity of managing time and its impact.

It does take time, but to be honest and maybe because I'm not in a locality team ... I think time around supervision and thinking about learning opportunities wasn't so difficult. I think for me what was a bit more difficult, particularly with the failing students was managing the time, particularly when people were failing, you had to find opportunities to re-test their skills (PE1)

She went on to reflect that the progression of a good student was something that made it rewarding and worthwhile and that the required input decreased.

The thing about having a student that's ok... it felt like for the first half of the placement you needed to put a lot of time in, a lot of effort but for the second half of the placement you just got so much back it made it worthwhile .. she actually gave a lot to the team in terms of her contribution

Conversely with a failing student she said this was 'totally reversed' and it 'took more and more time as the placement went on' therefore this sense of progression in the practice educator role was not present. This is important as it demonstrates not only the unplanned dimension to the increased

allocation of time but can be seen as a potential source of resentment as the balance of a social worker's precious and limited time is tipped inexorably toward the practice education element of the duality of their role. Furthermore, it is tipped toward a part of that role which is uncomfortable and unfulfilling. Unsurprisingly there were also comments on how much longer it took to write the assessment reports of students who had either failed or struggled significantly.

These comments may not appear to directly relate to the subject of HEI - practice collaboration, however, I would venture that an apparent lack of understanding and appreciation on the part of the HEI of this complex mix of practical and emotional impact could serve to fuel resentment and animosity as evidenced in previous studies (Burgess et al., 1998; Sharpe, 2000). The lack of availability of the tutor or their apparent lack of responsiveness to the situation may then symbolically reinforce this lack of appreciation. Indeed Burgess et al, (1998: 56) found that of all the stakeholders involved in a fail event only the tutors felt they did not need additional support to cope. To the practice educators this may then feel like a very unequal partnership indeed.

Whilst Shapton (2007) in his comparison of academic and practice assessment does not specifically discuss time management, many of the elements of comparison are inherently more labour intensive in what he terms the 'practice focus' as opposed to the 'academic focus' (44). In the methods of assessment, for example, he identifies that learning opportunities are individualised, the scope of tasks is very wide, requirements are open to interpretation and the evidence for assessment needs to be obtained from several sources. It must therefore be appreciated that the practice educator is coming to the table of collaboration with HEIs from a position of labour intensity having put in significantly more time than had been anticipated, and therefore increasing an aspect of practice learning already identified in this research as the least satisfying.

The interface with universities

The PE questionnaire asked, via open questions, what improvements could be made in practice learning. Six commented on the interface with universities. Some comments were general in nature, however, most related this specifically to the management of failing students. This was also present in the questionnaire responses from team managers and in interviews

with both practice educators and team managers. The responses all imply a perception of the university creating a barrier to a fail decision either by, what Burgess (1998) termed, an 'abdication of responsibility' (57) or by withholding information, also mentioned in Burgess (1998) or through a reluctance to challenge. The overarching theme was one of making the fail process problematic.

Abdicating responsibility as a barrier to failing

This was characterised by the feeling that the situation was given either a low priority or that the university displayed a lack of responsibility.

Tutors seem uninterested about placement and little work seems to be done with students by tutors if there are placement issues. The impression appears to be that little time is made available to tutors to cover this aspect of work (PE questionnaire)

A failing student is a very stressful situation to manage with very little support from the college (PE questionnaire)

When a placement is difficult it has a significant impact on the practice teacher, the manager and the team. The colleges are not helpful at all. (TM questionnaire)

I think that we should be more robust as an agency when we have difficult placements and need to talk to the colleges about students who perform badly. We have found colleges unwilling to take any responsibility for their students' poor performance. Perhaps it should be in the service level agreement? (TM questionnaire)

It is worth noting that the questionnaires did not specifically ask for comment on interaction with universities or about failing students but that these were responses to a general question about improvements needed in practice learning, few comments were made on any other issue in response to these open questions possibly indicating the weight given to this lack of collaboration by the respondents. Further comments to this effect were given in the interviews.

God they (the universities) are hopeless!...One student became really abusive and we brought the college in who basically said it's nothing to do with us, we got no support at all from the college. Very bad news. (TM2)

To be fair she (tutor) participated in the meeting that was helpful, but I think it was pretty minimal, I got the impression she didn't see that as her role, she was just concerned if I was going to fail the student, if you weren't going to fail the student well then just ...' (tails off) (PE3)

I did speak to the tutor but it didn't feel that she wanted to remain involved in it... it was definitely very isolating. (PE4)

There was little animosity directed toward individual tutors in any of the responses and several participants mention that tutors had been helpful in meetings. The target for the dissatisfaction, and in several cases animosity, was the HEI itself and its role in relation to the student. This resonates with Finch's (2010) findings that practice educators discussed HEIs as if they were a 'faceless institution' (90) and rarely mentioned individual tutors.

Cowburn et al.'s (2000) discussion on practice assessment of social work students outlines what they consider to be the tasks of those involved in a competence model of assessment. They state that 'the task of the tutor in relation to the assessment of practice competence is generally more peripheral and concerned with providing an overview of progress on the placement and ensuring programme procedures are followed' (630). What may be more pertinent to consider however, is what the participants within the practice learning partnership perceive to be the role of the tutor and, by extension, the role of the HEI. What also needs to be considered, when viewed from an organisational perspective, is that not only those individual practice educators will be involved in decisions on the continuation of practice learning within an organisation. As can be seen from the team manager's comment that HEI's are '*unwilling to take responsibility for their students' poor performance*' the view here is not that HEI's are peripheral but that they retain 'ownership' of the student and the student's performance and therefore should take responsibility for it. The implication being that this is not one of our staff this is one of your students. From the practice organisations perspective it may seem that the HEIs retain responsibility for writing the rules on the process of assessment yet abdicate this responsibility at the crucial point that things go wrong. Basnett & Sheffield (2010) found that when the power and control of the ultimate outcome of the fail decision was retained by the HEI, either through not upholding the practice educators' decision or not informing them of the decision, this had a negative impact on practice educators with some withdrawing from

practice learning. This may give a confused picture to practice educators, their managers and organisations that HEIs 'abdicate' (Burgess, 1998) their responsibility for practice assessment at the point at which it is happening yet are apparently dismissive of the practice educators role when ultimate decisions are made. This is despite the fact that the HEI may adhere to Cowburn et al.'s (2000) view that they are peripheral and do not want to influence the assessment recommendation of the practice educator. The potential negative feelings of the practice educator with regard to this are compounded by the labour intensity, both practical and emotional which has surrounded this endeavour. This is illustrated in the comment from PE1

Because you've been through such a struggle to arrive at these conclusions you've worked so hard to be fair about it, you want someone to say yes that's right. You want someone to validate it. (TM1)

Lack of transparency as a barrier to failing

In common with other research (Burgess, 1998; Sharpe, 2000) the withholding of information about the student or a lack of transparency was raised as an issue of concern and considered as impeding the accurate assessment of the student. In the questionnaires it was stated that '*more information from the university*' and '*clearer learning needs defined*' would improve the experience of practice learning. Another comment stated that '*there have been occasions where it may have been helpful to have more honesty from the college/tutors about concerns with students*'. One practice educator said a student who had failed the placement with her went on to a placement with another practice educator whom she knew and she '*actually felt quite angry*' that this second practice educator was having the same difficulties with the student as she did, yet the university had not told him of the previous problems. She felt the university was being '*dishonest*'.

This may indicate a dichotomy from an HEI perspective between the need for an unbiased fair assessment that meets with rigorous quality standards on the one hand and the need to base effective learning strategies on a transparent baseline of a student's learning needs on the other. There may also be an issue of confidentiality the parameters of which need both to be clarified within the HEI itself and to be explained to the practice educator and their organisation.

Lack of willingness to challenge as a barrier to failing

There was a general sense from some that the university was reluctant for the student to fail and this was often attributed to a perceived powerlessness on the part of the university. Several of the comments attributed this pressure to what they saw as the politicisation of the process and increasing litigiousness of students.

Colleges appear to feel under pressure to resolve issues with failing students in favour of the student. Possibly to avoid student seeking legal representation and drawing out the issues. (PE Questionnaire)

We were told that the students bring lawyers to some of these meetings and that colleges themselves find it very difficult to challenge, so the student passes just because everybody was too frightened to challenge them (TM2)

I also felt that there seemed to be quite a lot of politics about it all that got in the way of appropriate decision making (PE1)

There were lots of things that were not actually said, they were intimidated but not said. I thought if you've got something to say let's all just say it, but my feeling was that people were frightened of the student because she came into the meeting with a very political head on (PE2)

It is important to note that these comments do not provide evidence of any actual litigation or complaint but a perception of the HEIs wariness and hesitance in the face of possible litigation and complaint. This may reflect what Morley (2003) terms 'changed social and pedagogical relations in the academy' (129), the move to a consumerist approach to education where a market economy means students are no longer constructed as 'recipients of welfare, but purchasers of an expensive product' (129). This is reflected in the recent government white paper 'Students at the heart of the system' (BIS, 2011) which firmly positions students in the role of consumer.

The implication of this is that a recipient (student) dissatisfied with this product (their education) is likely to challenge the quality of this product. This could be reframed in terms of a redressing of power and an acknowledgement of the right for students to receive the quality of education to which they have been promised. Local authorities have become familiar with complaint and litigation from service users and their representatives

and now incorporate this as part of their professional landscape. This is a more recent phenomenon in higher education and the recent increase in fees may increase the likelihood of this.

Failure to fail

There were views that concur with other research (Burgess et al., 1998; Furness, 2011) as mentioned that it is a difficult process to fail a student and that some students pass who should not. As TM1 states *'of course failing people is a nightmare. I think it was easier to invade Poland than it was to try and fail a social work student'*

PE3 and PE4 who had both had difficult experiences with students but who went on to pass them were clear that they would not have passed the student were they in their final placement.

If she'd been a second year student I would have seriously considered failing her but it was clear you were told that what was expected was for you to develop them over the course of the placement. To be honest I still worry about the fact that she might be practicing out there, you know I would never employ her in all honesty. (PE3)

I did pass him purely on the basis because it was his first placement but I made lots of recommendations. If it had been a final placement I probably wouldn't have passed him. I think I heard that he didn't pass his next placement. (PE4)

This could resonate with Sharpe's (2000) interpretation of students being 'shuffled through' (13) although there is not enough evidence to indicate that inaccurate assessments were made on these occasions.

TM1 offered an explanation of why she thought practice educators pass students when they should not

I think sometimes there is an inherent pressure not to fail students ... we've had experience of that and I think because of that there is pressure not to raise concerns even if they are very serious concerns as there is a sense of them being quite significantly minimised and your life being made much more difficult and so I do believe that a lot of students pass when they shouldn't pass because of the pressure that's put on the practice teachers because I think it's twice as difficult to fail somebody than to just grit your teeth and give a fairly bland report and scrape them through which I think is bad for the profession but I think the pressure is on for people to do that.

Disillusionment as a barrier to practice education

Since being a practice educator PE1 had become a team manager and said that she was a strong advocate of learning and creating a learning organisation but her experience had an impact on how she viewed practice learning and this was largely as a consequence of the interface with the university.

I felt quite disillusioned with the role of the college. I think over time I would have got over the issue to do with having a failing student but it was the whole process that left me disillusioned really and feeling disempowered

Discussion

Despite it not being the intended focus of the research, the impact of failing or problematic placements emerged as a dominant theme for practice educators and team managers and there was clear indication that a difficult experience with a student was a significant contributory factor to social workers discontinuing the practice educator role. It also became evident that the negative emotions surrounding the event were not solely as a consequence of the failed placement but also attributed to the role the students' universities played in this event.

The findings of the research also demonstrated that there was a perception from some practice educators and managers that the university and its representative tutors presented a barrier to a fail decision, thus playing a significant part in the so called 'failure to fail' phenomenon. This not only has a significant impact on the quality of future social work practice but on the practice educators' belief in the credibility of the entire process. What this research also indicated was that the feelings of lack of credibility in the process can extend beyond the individual practice educator to that of the team manager. Once considered in this light, the significance of the issue begins to shift outward from one of an individual relationship between one student, one practice educator and one tutor to having a more pervasive influence within the organisations themselves. The potentially damaging effects of this could be significant to the cultivation of effective partnerships between practice organisations and HEIs. This is timely to consider given that the sector is in a phase of reconfiguration

of such partnerships as a consequence of the Social Work Reform Board's recommendations who have stated that collaboration is 'central to the delivery of social work reforms' (SWRB, 2011) .

Could, therefore a broader conceptualisation of this area of tension assist in its understanding by moving beyond the personal interactions of the individuals involved in the failure event to considering them and the learning environment in its situated context (Lave & Wenger, 1991)? In other words, as a consequence of the event happening at the intersection of two distinct organisations or 'communities of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

This research focuses on one organisation and a small sample of individuals. An additional limitation is that it does not explore when things go right and those involved in social work education will be able to cite occasions of successful and supportive collaboration during fail events. Nevertheless the findings of this research taken together with other research in the area indicate that there are recurring themes in terms of collaboration and this research highlights the practice organisation's perception of the HEI as instrumental in the cause of the 'failure to fail'. Shapton (2007) suggest a cultivation of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) to ensure that practice educators are fully engaged in the community of social work education. Basnett & Sheffield's (2010) research indicates that not involving practice educators fully in this community can leave them feeling marginalized and as a consequence less likely to want to remain involved. This would also appear to be the case from the findings of this research.

What this research also indicates is the significance of the organisational dimension on effective collaboration. Therefore in order to understand the practices and perceptions that give rise to ineffective collaboration there is a need to consider how the organisation views the status of the student and views the role of their own and each other organisation in the learning and assessment of students. Concern has been raised that practice education is considered a peripheral role in social worker practice organisations (Bell & Webb, 1992; Shardlow et al., 2002; Furness & Gilligan, 2004; Clapton et al., 2006), and considered in terms of an 'optional activity' for staff (Lindsay & Walton, 2000: 14). There have been moves over the last few years to incorporate the education of the next generation of social workers as part of the core business of both social workers and their agencies. The reconfiguration of the post qualifying framework in 2006 had the intention of making 'enabling the learning of others' a role taken on by all social workers undertaking any post qualifying training (GSCC, 2005) and more

recently the SWRBs emphasis on the centrality of partnership working (SWRB, 2011). The development of the Professional Capabilities Framework by the SWRB (www.collegeofsocialwork.org 2012) is an endorsement of this by its continuum of professional development throughout the career and its positioning of the practice education or professional education role at the level of advance practitioner giving it an integration and status within the policy context that has never previously existed. I would argue however, that without an exploration and transparency about the role and perceptions of HEIs and practice organisations toward social work education there is a danger of replicating poor experiences of collaboration during fail events and continuing to attribute them solely to badly handled individual experiences.

In order to incorporate the practice and HEI organisations themselves as a dimension within this debate it may be useful to look further at theories of work based learning. To do this we would need to move beyond the community of practice which comprises those involved in social work education to consider the much wider and seemingly more remote boundaries of each organisation. Fuller & Unwin (2011) state that ‘any attempt to understand learning at work has to consider the wider context in which a particular workplace exists. The primary function of any workplace is not learning’(46). This is a factor acknowledged in the literature about failing social work students (Shapton, 2007). However, less apparent is the acknowledgement that the primary focus of any HEI is not social work practice or indeed even social work education. Those of us in the community of practice of social work education have our respective organisations as large, looming backdrops with their own foci, goals, priorities, regulations, culture and sanctions. These organisations themselves are mediated by the wider political, economic and cultural domains of the society in which they operate.

A conceptual work-based learning framework that takes the organisations as its focus is activity theory and Engestrom’s (2001) extension of this in his development of expansive learning theory. Activity theory sees the organisation itself as the learner or the unit of analysis and that this unit is not static but dynamic and goal orientated. In order to pursue this goal the organisation needs to navigate through various mediating artefacts which Engestrom (2001) terms tools and signs, rules, community and divisions of labour. Of specific relevance is that activity theory considers the interaction of multiple units of analysis, in other words, multiple organisations with their own ‘objects’ (Engestrom, 2001) toward which they are oriented and

with their own mediating artefacts. It is in the working through of these contradictions inherent in this so called boundary-crossing (Engestrom, 2001, 2011; Konkola et al., 2007; Tsui et al., 2007) that development and growth or expansive learning occurs. According to Engestrom (2001), principles which must be considered include the 'multi-voicedness' (136) of activity systems, their historicity and the fact that they are transformed over lengthy periods of time. This is certainly true of Local Authorities and Higher Education organisations. If we are to address these crises in collaboration when fail events occur we need to pre-empt them by learning as multiple organisations with an awareness of each other's goals, mediating artefacts, multi-voicedness and historicity. In addition we might want to consider power and hierarchy as part of this historicity. This approach may assist us to re-evaluate some of the key issues raised in this research such as the dichotomy of unbiased assessment versus transparency of learning needs and the rules of engagement within the transforming landscape of student as customer. Crucially, it may assist us to consider the role of our organisations in relation to social work students and social work education and, importantly, the expectations we have of the role of each other's organisations.

Conclusion

With the introduction of the Social Work Reform Board's recommendations we are at an optimal time for renegotiating the social work education landscape in the context of both HEI and practice organisations. Failing placements and what these reveal about the weak points of collaboration could usefully feed into this agenda. A recommendation from Burgess et al.'s (1998) research was that those individuals involved in a failing placement should 'listen openly, beyond personal and professional investments, to what another member of the placement system is saying' (68). The research outlined here indicates that in order to move toward a position of effective collaboration, and ultimately effective development of the social work profession, this listening needs to take place with an understanding and appreciation of the context of the organisations in which it is happening. It is also likely to benefit from being discussed in a pre-emptive manner accepting that its management is part of the partnership process.

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