Reflections on Practice Learning in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland: Lessons from Student Experiences

George Wilson , Erna O'Connor , Trish Walsh & Margaret Kirby

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Practice learning is viewed as one of the most important components of social work education wherever in the world social work is practised. Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland provide an interesting case example of the educational impact on students resulting from their experience of different models of practice learning. Although sharing a common historical legacy, recent developments in policy in both jurisdictions have tended to engender greater divergences in how programmes organise and deliver social work education and practice learning. Drawing on findings from a joint-research project with students in Queen's University, Belfast and Trinity College, Dublin, the authors highlight significant cross-border similarities as well as differences in the way practice learning is conceptualised, organised and delivered. Through comparing and contrasting student experiences, the authors reflect on how the findings might help to inform the future development of practice learning standards in both jurisdictions.

Keywords: Comparative Practice Learning; Student Experiences; Cross-Border Mobility; Educational Policy

Introduction

Whilst partition of the state in 1922 led to the emergence of distinct systems of welfare provision and significant differences in social policy and legislation, social work in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland shares some common history and

George Wilson, Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland; Erna O'Connor, Trish Walsh & Margaret Kirby, Trinity College, Dublin, Republic of Ireland.

Correspondence to: George Wilson, School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen's University of Belfast, 6 College Park, Belfast BT7 1LP, Northern Ireland. Email: g.wilson@qub.ac.uk

features (Kearney, 2005). Until 1993, for example, social work education programmes in both jurisdictions were accredited by the UK-based Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) with identical standards and requirements for course accreditation. Following the withdrawal of CCETSW and a period of transition, the National Social Work Qualifications Board (NSWQB) in the Republic began, after 1993, to award their own professional social work qualifications. Since devolution of responsibility for social work education throughout the UK in 2003, Northern Ireland has also had its own social work regulating authority—the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC). Nevertheless, collaborative efforts in both jurisdictions have continued to promote, encourage and facilitate cross-border social worker mobility, and the respective regulating authorities are among the most experienced in dealing with such issues within the wider European context (CCETSW/NSWQB, 1998).

In both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, developments in child care policy and legislation, and a series of re-organisations of health and social care during the past decade have led to increased demand for social work services (DOH, 1999; NISCC, 2004; NSWQB, 2007; Wilson and McCrystal, 2007). Concomitant with this increased demand, the intake of students to National Social Work Qualification (NSWQ) courses in the Republic of Ireland (including those provided by Trinity College, Dublin) rose, for example, from 110 in 2000 to 201 in 2007 (NSWQB, 2007). Following the introduction of a new social work degree in 2004 there has also been an unprecedented expansion in student numbers in Northern Ireland. In Queen's University, Belfast, for example, the student numbers increased from 50 per year in 2004 to 130 in 2007 (Wilson *et al.*, 2008).

Since the establishment of separate regulating authorities, social work education policy has followed somewhat different trajectories in the two parts of the island of Ireland (CCETSW/NSWQB, 1998). While there continues to be a degree of commonality in core content in relation to social work knowledge, values and skills, it has been noted that there are 'substantial epistemological and organisational differences' between the two educational systems (CCETSW/NSWQB, 1998, p. 1). One major difference, for example, is that the Republic did not adopt the competence-based approach to social work education based on occupational standards which became the norm in Northern Ireland (as in other parts of the UK) during the 1990s (O'Hagan, 1996). Although social work has subsequently evolved in different ways, the profession's common legacy continues to be reflected in many key features of professional education at qualifying level, including the importance that programmes in both jurisdictions attach to practice learning (Kearney, 2005; Wilson *et al.*, 2008).

In considering the issue of quality in practice learning it is important for both academic institutions and agencies to be aware of 'what works' from the student's perspective (Fortune *et al.*, 1985; Doel and Shardlow, 1996; Knight, 2001). Given their common history, close proximity and tradition of cross-border social work interrelationships, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland provide an interesting case example for exploring standards and considering the educational impact of different models of practice learning. The main premise of this paper is that comparing and contrasting student experiences will help to provide important

insights of relevance not just to promoting quality standards in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland but in other countries seeking to develop social work education and practice learning.

Practice Learning in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland

Practice learning in the Republic of Ireland is based on what Rogers (1996) has described as a 'grace and favour' system of delivery, where coordinators from the different course providers directly approach agencies, social work managers and individual practice teachers to supply particular learning opportunities. Most practice teachers in the Republic are agency-based practitioners or managers who provide a placement for a student on a one-to-one basis (which are termed 'singletons' in Northern Ireland). They usually have autonomy about when and how many placements they provide and are paid an honorarium directly by the course provider for each student they take. Although this system is labour-intensive, it is designed to provide a high degree of flexibility and allows for optimum matching of student learning needs and available practice learning opportunities. The National Social Work Qualifications Board requires that all practice teachers who provide practice learning opportunities should be qualified social workers with two years' experience (NSWQB, 2006). Although only a minority of practice teachers in the Republic hold a specific qualification in practice teaching, the majority of staff who supply practice learning opportunities have participated in post-qualifying practice teacher training provided by course providers.

In contrast to the Republic, Northern Ireland has a regionally managed and organisationally centralised 'agency obligation' system of practice learning (Rogers, 1996). Formal partnerships with employers are designed to ensure that particular health and social care agencies are responsible for the effective provision of a regular quota of practice learning opportunities delivered to regionally agreed quality standards (NISCC, 2007). Whereas in the Republic course providers generally contract directly with individual practice teachers, funding to support practice learning in Northern Ireland is provided by the Department of Health and Social Services and Public Safety directly to employing agencies. Many practice learning opportunities in Northern Ireland, as in the Republic, are provided by 'singletons'—usually experienced practitioners or first line management staff. However, in order to service the expansion in student numbers, agencies in Northern Ireland have increasingly become dependent on 'off-site' practice teachers and utilising practice learning opportunities in residential or day care settings where there may be no qualified social workers employed (Barron, 2004; Wilson *et al.*, 2008). Off-site practice teachers usually work in agency training teams or independently and may supervise several students at one time, usually in conjunction with an 'on-site' practitioner/manager taking responsibility for accountability and providing day-to-day support for the student (Wilson, 2000). All of Northern Ireland's practice teachers are qualified social workers and nearly all are also holders of a post-qualifying award in practice teaching (Wilson, 2000).

Research Context

This comparative research project was completed between 2002 and 2004 with qualifying level social work students at Queen's and Trinity undertaking assessed practice learning opportunities within a range of statutory and voluntary agencies. The research included three cohorts of students from the two-year MSW programme at Queen's and one cohort of students from the two-year MSW course at Trinity. In order to address the imbalance in student numbers from the respective MSW programmes, it was decided to include two cohorts of third and fourth year students from Trinity's four-year undergraduate BSS programme. [The qualifying level MSW course at Queen's was replaced in 2004 by a three-year Bachelor of Social Work programme. This change, which may be untypical of other countries, followed a government decision that all social work qualifying level education in the UK should be at undergraduate level (NISCC, 2004). In contrast, professional-qualifying courses in the Republic of Ireland have continued to exist at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels with, as illustrated below, different entry requirements for each route.]

Social work programmes at both institutions included a mix of generic and specialist teaching. Graduates undertaking the MSW at both universities were required to complete two assessed practice placements of 140 days duration in total. The BSS at Trinity included 185 days assessed practice learning over three practice placements. MSW students in both institutions were required, as part of the entrance criteria, to have previous experience of social work/community work/social care (six months minimum for Queen's and nine months in the case of Trinity). BSS students in Trinity, while not expected on entry to have previous experience, were required to undertake an initial additional 30-day placement (not formally assessed) in a residential setting and volunteering as part of the first year curriculum.

Students undertaking the competence-based MSW at Queen's were required to produce a portfolio of evidence and self-evaluation report of their work during practice learning. Practice teachers at Queen's assessed students' practice against a number of specific competence requirements and related detailed performance indicators including, for example, communicating and engaging with and promoting and enabling service users. Practice teachers were then required to make a pass or fail recommendation based on their assessment of all the evidence contained in the portfolio and (at least three) direct observations of the students' practice.

Unlike the competence-based portfolio approach in Queen's, Trinity's method of assessing practice learning, as in other social work programmes in the Republic of Ireland, was (and is) more process-oriented and arguably more traditional. Instead of a predetermined competence-based curriculum, social work courses in the Republic of Ireland need to comply with national regulations on broadly-framed standards of practice and capacities to be demonstrable by qualifying stage (NSWQB, 2006). In addition, students in Trinity were required to demonstrate their learning through an assessed practice project which included a community profile, organisational analysis, practice studies and critical reflective learning exercises. In Trinity, although the practice teacher judges practice learning performance and makes a pass or fail

recommendation on the basis of this, the college separately assesses standards of learning from the practice project. During the period focused on in this research, the pass rate for practice learning in both universities was very high, with a fail rate of only 2% in Trinity and averaging less than 5% in Queen's.

Research Aims

One of the key aims of the project was to develop a greater understanding of the key characteristics of quality in practice learning from the students' perspective. The specific aims of the research were:

- to examine the quality of practice learning provision from the students' perspective;
- to identify key contextual features of the practice environment that affect the quality of the students' learning experience; and
- to make recommendations for further developing quality standards of practice learning.

Methodology

The research project employed a mixed methodology to try to ensure the validity and representativeness of the data collected. Previously, the majority of researchers would have used either a quantitative or a qualitative approach in the design of research projects. However, more recently, many commentators have highlighted the value of using a mixed methods approach as a means of enhancing the depth and quality of data collection and the results that can be obtained from research (Thomas, 2003; Tashakkori and Creswell, 2007).

A total of 139 MSW student from Queen's and 58 students from Trinity completed a questionnaire at the end of their practice learning opportunities. This represented 70% of all students registered on the Queen's course and 75% of those registered on the relevant years of the Trinity courses during the period the research was undertaken. A focus group meeting was held with 12 students from both Queen's and Trinity in order to pilot the survey and to help ensure that questions were relevant from the students' perspective. Following feedback from students, a number of minor adjustments were made to the survey and a question added about college preparation for practice learning. Arranged in four sections (covering students' demographic characteristics, induction, experience of learning opportunities and assessment) the survey consisted of a total of 54 questions. The questionnaire was designed to survey key aspects of the students' experience of practice learning and to encourage their reflection on how they had been facilitated and supported by practice teachers. The questionnaire was administered to students at meetings with them in both universities following completion of their practice learning opportunities and after pass/fail results had been issued. The data obtained from the questionnaires were coded and analysed using the SPSS version 10 for Windows computer package.

Following completion of the questionnaires the researchers conducted a preliminary analysis of the survey results and identified key findings which were

used as a topic guide for a further group interview with 12 students from Queen's and five students from Trinity. The purpose of this group interview was to further explore with students the quantitative findings from the survey and uncover the meanings they ascribed to their experiences. A number of key topics were identified from the survey, including, for example, the significance students attached to their interpersonal relationships with practice teachers, the prevalence of student anxiety, the different approaches applied to facilitate learning, and similarities and differences in the expectations of practice teachers and in arrangements for student supervision. At the same time students were given the opportunity to introduce other topics based on their own direct experience. The qualitative data obtained from group interviews were analysed using a process of content analysis, which helped to further highlight significant themes and issues from the students' perspective.

Perhaps the most significant limitation of this study was that the data obtained from students were not externally verified by data from other key stakeholders involved in the practice learning process, such as practice teachers and tutors. It is possible that the views of students may have been biased (negatively or positively) by a range of variables, including relationships with practice teachers, whether they had passed or failed, or the degree to which they had struggled with practice learning. Another significant limitation was that this research was undertaken with students in only one academic institution in Northern Ireland and one in the Republic of Ireland so may not be fully representative of practice learning in Ireland as a whole. Nevertheless, the high response to the questionnaires in both Queen's and Trinity, together with the triangulation provided by group interviews in both institutions, provides a degree of reassurance about the validity of the results obtained from this comparative study.

Findings

Demographic Characteristics of Students

Some 84% of MSW students in the sample from Queen's University and 95% of the BSS/MSW sample from Trinity College were female and 69% from Queen's and 81% from Trinity were aged less than 30. Only 9% of students from both universities were aged 40 or over. All students in the Queen's sample possessed an undergraduate degree, mainly in the social sciences. A total of 22 students held postgraduate degrees, which included eight with a Masters degree and two with a PhD. As the majority of the Trinity students (78%) were undertaking an undergraduate degree, it was unsurprising that just 28% of the overall sample held a primary degree, 3% held a postgraduate degree, while 9% held higher diplomas.

Practice Learning Settings and Satisfaction with Learning Opportunities

The majority of Queen's students (55%) were undertaking first, and 45% were completing second, practice learning opportunities. The majority of Trinity students were completing a second/middle (40%) or third/final (35%) assessed practice learning opportunity as part of their undergraduate programme while 25% were completing

a first practice learning opportunity on the postgraduate MSW programme. While 42% of students from Queen's obtained fieldwork practice learning opportunities, 28% were placed in residential and 17% in day care settings. In marked contrast, all students from Trinity College obtained fieldwork practice learning opportunities. The majority of Queen's students (63%) had off-site practice teachers mainly employed by training teams and the remaining 37% were singletons, mainly social work practitioners. Once again, in sharp contrast, 97% of Trinity students had agency-based singleton social work practitioners or managers as their practice teacher, with only two students (3%) indicating off-site practice teaching arrangements.

Table 1 indicates that students experienced practice learning opportunities with a variety of client groups and within a range of settings. Table 1 shows that child care settings accounted for less than 25% of practice learning opportunities in both jurisdictions.

Table 1 also indicates that Queen's had considerably more students working with older people and people with learning disabilities than their counterparts in Trinity. This reflects the high number of residential and day care practice learning opportunities in Northern Ireland, many of which provide services to older people and people with learning disabilities. A key difference here is that in the Republic these opportunities would be considered as social care sites and generally would not be used for assessed practice learning for social work students unless there was a social worker based there.

Students were asked to indicate on a five-point Likert scale how satisfied they were with the preparation provided by the university for undertaking their practice learning opportunity. The majority (63%) of Queen's students and almost half (47%) of Trinity students were satisfied or very satisfied with their preparation for practice learning. However, a significant number of students in both universities were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their preparation, 35% in Trinity and 21% in Queen's. One issue highlighted by students in both institutions undertaking their first practice learning opportunity was the timing and sequencing of teaching modules, which meant that some were inevitably going on practice learning opportunities without specific teaching preparation in that field of practice. For example, as one MSW Trinity student commented: 'I think it's quite difficult because everyone was prepared generally but not necessarily for a specific environment'. Students in both universities who had received an intensive programme of knowledge and skills teaching tailored to the practice learning opportunity, usually at a later stage of their training, were

Table 1   Placement Settings (Client Groups)

Area	Total % Queen's	Total % Trinity
Family and child care	23	25
Learning disability	23	7
Mental health	14	14
Older people	13	2
Health care, physical health and disability	11	21
Criminal justice	8	13
Other settings	8	18

generally more positive about their preparation. The overwhelming majority of students (87% from Queen's and 86% from Trinity) were either satisfied or very satisfied with the practice learning opportunities they were provided with.

Satisfaction with Supervision and Support from Practice Teacher

The same total of students (70%) in both Queen's and Trinity were satisfied or very satisfied with the supervision and support they received from practice teachers (Table 2). Both Queen's and Trinity students highlighted the very positive working relationships they had developed with practice teachers during practice learning and clearly valued the constructive support and encouragement they had received. For example, one Trinity student stated that she 'felt very supported during placement and comfortable that I could approach my practice teacher whatever the problem or query'. Similarly, a Queen's student reported that 'My PT was excellent and made herself available to me—supervision was very supportive and we developed a great relationship'.

However, as also indicated in Table 2, a significant minority of students in both universities were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the support and supervision they received (21% of Queen's students and 14% of Trinity students). It was evident from qualitative comments that some students had experienced a poor relationship with their practice teacher. The perceived power imbalance between practice teacher and student and concerns about assessment seemed to be significant factors affecting the quality of their relationship. The following comments from a Queen's and Trinity student, respectively, were quite typical of the feedback received from respondents in both institutions: 'Practice teacher/student relationship reduced my self-confidence and ability to articulate my personal learning and development'; 'You can't be 100% honest, there's such a power imbalance between you and the practice teacher'.

Frequency and Length of Supervision Sessions

Some 84% of students from Queen's and 63% from Trinity had weekly supervision throughout the placement. A total of 10% of students from Queen's and 23% from Trinity had fortnightly supervision and the remainder reported no regular pattern. [One of the cohorts (35% of Trinity respondents) was on a three-day-per-week concurrent placement with two days in college which may account for a higher number receiving fortnightly supervision.] The findings revealed significant differences between the two universities in the average length of individual

Table 2   Satisfaction with Supervision and Support from Practice Teacher

Satisfaction level	% of Queen's students	% of Trinity students
Very satisfied	51	42
Satisfied	19	35
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	6	9
Dissatisfied	10	5
Very dissatisfied	11	9

supervision sessions that students had experienced. Whilst a small majority of Queen's students (53%) averaged two hours in supervision, 28% had supervision for two and a half hours and 14% for one and a half hours per week throughout the placement. However, only 11% of Trinity students reported experiencing two-hour supervision sessions, 35% had supervision lasting one and a half hours and a majority (54%) had supervision averaging just one hour.

Facilitation of Learning/Use of Learning Tools in Supervision

Table 3 shows the range and frequency of learning tools that students reported practice teachers had employed. The extensive use of process records among Queen's students, indicated in Table 3, is not surprising in that they were expected to provide these as evidence in their portfolio. While process recordings were recommended rather than required for Trinity students, Table 3 indicates that almost two-thirds (62%) produced these.

Modelling, which involves students directly observing their practice teachers in direct work with service users, was only experienced by 33% of Queen's students. (As indicated earlier, Queen's students were mainly placed with off-site practice teachers, staff generally employed in training teams rather than as practitioners.) In marked contrast, modelling was the most common learning tool used with Trinity students (76%). The latter findings might be explained by the fact that singletons, who constitute the overwhelming majority of practice teachers in Trinity, would, as practitioners, be in a position to provide greater opportunities for students to shadow and observe their practice with service users, in comparison with off-site practice teachers who are in the majority at Queen's. This contention is supported by the finding that students with singletons (55%) at Queen's were significantly more likely than those with off-site practice teachers (19%), to experience modelling. As indicated in Table 3, Trinity students were also more likely to experience the use of other learning approaches such as role-play and rehearsal, although the total numbers of students here were not as large.

Expectations from Practice Teachers and Student Anxieties

Students were asked to rate practice teachers' expectations of them in relation to the quality and quantity of work they were required to produce. While 32% of students from Queen's and 42% of students from Trinity felt their practice teacher's

Table 3 Use of Learning Tools

Learning tools	% Frequency of use Queen's students	% Frequency of use Trinity students
Process records	88	62
Modelling	33	76
Rehearsal	13	21
Role-play	10	17
Video tape	14	7
Audio tape	9	9

expectations were about right, a significant number believed that expectations had been high or very high (63% from Queen's and 49% from Trinity). To explore perceptions of the nature of practice teacher expectations more closely, students were asked to identify how frequently they were required to produce written reflective evaluations for supervision purposes (Table 4).

As indicated in Table 4, nearly two-thirds of students from Queen's were asked to produce written reflective accounts either always (28%) or often (34%), and only 8% were never asked. In sharp contrast, less than a third of Trinity students were always (14%) or often (14%) asked, and nearly a quarter (23%) were never required to provide written reflective evaluations for supervision. The latter results show similarities with the experience of those Queen's students who had singleton practice teachers. For example, whereas only 14% of students with singletons reported that they were always expected to produce written evaluations for supervision, 36% of those with off-site practice teachers were required to do so. Overall, these results may reflect a tendency (and perhaps a need?) among off-site practice teachers to rely more heavily on the written medium to explore students' practice learning experience, in comparison to singletons who are in closer proximity to students' practice and can more frequently utilise and depend on direct observation, feedback from colleagues and verbal accounts of practice experience.

Students were asked to rate the level of anxiety they had experienced during practice learning. While 46% of students from Queen's and 75% of students from Trinity rated their anxiety as low to medium, a total of 49% of students from Queen's and 25% of students from Trinity reported experiencing high to very high levels of anxiety. Feedback suggested that for Queen's students, compilation of evidence for the portfolio and for Trinity students, academic assignments concurrent with practice learning were among the major sources of stress and concern. However, most student anxieties appeared to focus on interpersonal relationship issues with practice teachers. In the latter cases the supervision process seems to have been counterproductive in fuelling anxieties and negatively affecting the learning process. The following are typical of comments (from a Queen's and Trinity student, respectively): 'Tension in the relationship with practice teacher—not enough recognition of my ability to self-reflect. It was a nightmare and very stressful. Got there eventually but it was unnecessary stress'; 'When there is anxiety there it really does affect your relationship with your practice teacher and your overall learning ability'.

Table 4   Requirement to Produce Written Reflective Evaluations

Frequency	% of Queen's students	% of Trinity students
Always	27.5	14
Often	33.8	14
Sometimes	23.8	37
Seldom	6.3	12
Never	7.5	23

Perspectives on Assessment and Learning Outcomes

Over two-thirds of students in both institutions (80% of students in Queen's and 76% in Trinity) were clear or very clear about the criteria and standards they were being assessed against. Similarly, only 3% of Queen's students and 2% from Trinity were very unclear about assessment criteria. High percentages of students in both universities (82% from Queen's and 74% from Trinity) were also satisfied or very satisfied that their practice teacher's report was an accurate reflection of their learning and development, with only 8% from Queen's and 13% from Trinity dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their assessment. The majority of students were also clear or very clear (88% from Queen's and 85% from Trinity) about their strengths and future learning needs.

Suggestions for Improving Practice Learning

Finally, students were asked for suggestions on how practice learning could be developed. A frequent comment from Queen's students concerned the need to increase the length of practice learning opportunities: 'Placements should be longer—quality of learning could be vastly improved if students had more time to develop practice'. A number of Queen's students were clearly disappointed about the practice learning opportunity they had been allocated and felt choice needed to be improved. Some Trinity students commented on the need for more agency-specific information in advance of practice learning, and felt better induction including a pre-placement meeting involving all parties would be helpful.

For Queen's students, perhaps the most frequent concerns focused on the amount of effort they needed to devote to portfolio building and collecting written evidence to demonstrate competence, which they felt had limited the time for direct work with service users. Among the comments made by students, the following were typical: 'Abolish portfolio building to allow students to fully participate in placement without having to think about portfolio'. Trinity students also commented on competing demands of academic work and practice, suggesting '... give more time to finalise placement projects, it was stressful attempting to hand in the (placement) project and also terminate cases in an appropriate way especially in a busy practice setting'.

Discussion

The results confirmed that the Queen's and Trinity students who participated in this research experienced a wide range of practice learning opportunities with a variety of service user groups. While there was some variation in age range, a large majority of students in this study were under 40 years of age. In both universities a very large majority of students were female—a finding which may be consistent with a general trend identified in some other countries towards male under-representation in social work education programmes (Perry and Cree, 2003). Overall, the results suggested that the models of practice learning provision in Queen's and Trinity are able to deliver, from the students' perspective, satisfactory standards of practice learning opportunities and practice teaching supervision and support (Rogers, 1996).

However, the institutionalised arrangements for supplying practice learning in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are quite different and this research study provided an opportunity to compare and contrast the respective strengths and limitations of each model of provision. In relation to strengths, the 'grace and favour' approach to provision in the Republic of Ireland would appear to give the course provider more control over the selection of practice learning opportunities (Rogers, 1996). Arguably, universities within this model have greater flexibility for offering choice of opportunities to students tailored to suit their particular learning needs. The evidence from this study, for example, indicated that all practice learning opportunities took place in sites in which Trinity students had the opportunity to observe directly the work of qualified social work staff. However, within this system the university contract for provision is usually with the individual practice teacher and agencies are not obliged to provide opportunities for students. Consequently, on a strategic level universities are in a less advantageous position to develop consistency and uniform standards of provision across the agency infrastructure of practice learning. This may help to explain some of the variation found among Trinity students in relation, for example, to agency induction and the duration of supervision with practice teachers.

In addition to different systems for delivering practice learning provision, this study revealed that the models of practice teaching in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are also quite distinctive. The study also provided an opportunity to compare and contrast, from the students' perspective, the respective strengths and limitations of these approaches. The findings suggested that the model of practice teaching (singleton or off-site) may have significant implications for the form and content of practice learning experienced by students. The results indicated that whereas Trinity students experienced an almost exclusively (97%) singleton model of practice teaching, with few staff holding a qualification in practice teaching, students at Queen's experienced a mix of off-site (63%) and singleton practice teachers (37%) with a large majority of staff holding a qualification in practice teaching. The finding that students in both universities had broadly similar levels of satisfaction with support and supervision might at first glance suggest that the different models of practice teaching had little significant impact on the learning environments they experienced. However, on closer inspection the results indicate significant differences in orientation, and expectations between practice teachers in the two universities, which impacted on the student learning experience. This extended to differences between practice teachers in their approach to facilitating learning, and it was evident, for example, that students in Trinity had significantly more opportunities for shadowing and experiencing modelling through observing singleton practice teachers' direct work with service users. This approach would encompass what Maynard and Furlong (1995) have termed an apprenticeship model of teaching and learning which places an emphasis on demonstrating, role modelling, collaborating and helping students to sense and fit into established routines.

In contrast, practice teachers working with Queen's students appeared to focus less on role modelling, spent considerably more time in supervision sessions, had higher expectations in relation to students providing written evaluations and demonstrating evidence (in portfolio form) of their competence. Perhaps not surprisingly these findings

are consistent with the competency model which is a feature of the Northern Ireland system (Maynard and Furlong, 1995). Nevertheless, comparisons between Queen's students indicated that singleton practice teachers in Northern Ireland may tend to be more orientated towards an apprenticeship model. Some of the working practices of singleton practice teachers working with Queen's students, for example, in relation to expectations of students producing written work, were more akin to their singleton counterparts working with Trinity students than their off-site colleagues in Northern Ireland (Maynard and Furlong, 1995). Apart from the three direct observations required by regulations, off-site practice teachers in Northern Ireland are not in a position to routinely observe the work of students on a regular basis and this perhaps helps to explain the findings which indicated a heavy reliance on written evidence and evaluations as a vehicle for teaching and learning within the supervision process. Arguably, given this orientation, off-site practice teachers may be more focused on the learning aspects of the students' experience of practice learning in comparison with some singletons.

The high levels of anxiety expressed by students in both universities suggest that this may be a common international feature of the student experience of practice learning in social work. This finding is also a salutary reminder of the vulnerability of students in situations where not only teaching and learning goals are at stake but future careers are also dependent on satisfactory assessment outcomes (Gambrill, 1997). The high levels of stress and anxiety reported by students in this study were universal enough to appear normative aspects of the practice learning experience, and as such underline the need to ensure that practice teachers provide high quality supervision and support. In both universities most student dissatisfaction and anxiety seemed to focus on the quality of the interpersonal relationship with practice teachers. These results indicated the need for practice teachers to actively re-address the power imbalance in their relationships with students. The findings also underlined the need for practice teachers to develop and sustain an open and honest relationship with students and create a safe and supportive learning environment in order to facilitate most effectively the learning process (Edwards and Richards, 2002; Lefevre, 2005).

Approaches to social work assessment in Northern Ireland and the Republic are different and this research study allowed useful comparisons to be made about students' perceptions of process and outcomes in this area. One of the interesting findings from this study was that there was little difference among students in both universities in relation to their perceptions about the clarity and fairness of how they were assessed, and both groups reported high levels of satisfaction in this area. This finding would tend to contradict the claim that competence-based approaches (Northern Ireland) have greater fairness and transparency than more traditional methods of assessment (Republic of Ireland) in social work education, and instead point to the importance of the student being aware of what is being assessed and how (O'Hagan, 1996).

Finally, the results from this study indicated that there were some differences but also some common ground between students in both universities in their suggestions for improving practice learning. For example, Queen's students highlighted the need to extend the number of days spent on practice learning and many felt that 70 days was too short given the various pressures on their time. This view was taken into account

in designing the new degrees in social work throughout the UK, and practice learning opportunities are now significantly longer (NISCC, 2004). Students in both universities were critical of the amount of time they had to spend on producing written work which detracted from practice learning. In the case of students from Queen's criticisms focused on the time-consuming nature of compiling portfolio evidence, and for Trinity students it centred on having to produce academic work including practice projects which limited the time available for direct practice with service users. The nature of these criticisms, albeit indirectly, perhaps only serve to underline the importance and value which students in both institutions attached to their practice learning experience.

Conclusion

The results from this study highlight that practice learning as experienced by Queen's and Trinity students in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, respectively, has many strengths, and that most students felt well supported by practice teachers. One key lesson from this research was that while the different models of practice learning in Northern Ireland and the Republic each had their strengths, both may also have inherent limitations which impact on choice and ultimately the quality of the student learning experience. Practice learning is a complex process involving many different stakeholders including students, practice teachers, service users, tutors, agency managers and regulating authorities. More comprehensive research, involving a greater range of stakeholders, and taking into account the broad range of variables which impact on the quality of practice learning, would be necessary to explore more fully 'what works' best in relation to facilitating student learning. Nevertheless, comparing students' experience of practice learning in different countries remains a good starting point for identifying the directions in which quality standards in practice learning may be further enhanced in the future.

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