Developing Practice Learning: Student Perspectives

George Wilson , Trish Walsh & Margaret Kirby

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Developing Practice Learning: Student Perspectives

George Wilson, Trish Walsh & Margaret Kirby

The introduction of the new social work degrees in the UK has further underlined the importance of practice learning in social work education. However, student perceptions of practice learning and their view of quality standards in this area have been under-researched. This paper reports on a two-year study of MSW students at Queen's University, Belfast that examined, from the students' perspective, a number of key quality indicators relating to practice learning. One of the main aims of the study was to identify significant contextual features of the practice environment that affect the quality of the students' learning experience. Northern Ireland provides a useful case study in this context as it is thought to have some advantages in its practice learning provision in comparison to other parts of the UK. The paper concludes with an analysis of the main implications of the research and highlights key issues which need to be considered by academic institutions and employing agencies in further developing quality standards of practice learning.

Keywords: Practice Learning; Student Perspectives; Standards; Developing Quality

Introduction

The recent introduction in Northern Ireland of a new Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree has underlined the increasing importance of practice learning in social work education (GSCC, 2002; NISCC, 2003a, 2003b). In Northern Ireland, as elsewhere in the UK, the development of its new degree has resulted in the need to increase the quantity of practice learning opportunities (Barron, 2004). A major concern for both academic institutions and agencies is how this goal is achievable without compromising the quality of practice teaching. Northern Ireland provides a

George Wilson, Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland & Trish Walsh & Margaret Kirby, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland.

Correspondence to: George Wilson, Lecturer, School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen's University, Belfast, 6 College Park, Belfast BT7 1LP, Northern Ireland. Tel: (+44) 028 9097 1475; Fax: (+44) 028 9097 393; Email: g.wilson@qub.ac.uk

useful focus of study in this context, as it is an area where the infrastructure of practice learning appears to have significant strengths, relative to other parts of the UK (Rea, 1994; Wilson, 2000). How students think and feel about the learning opportunities and support they receive are clearly central to the debate about quality. However, this has generally been an under-researched area and there have been few empirical studies of students' perceptions of practice learning (Lefevre, 2005).

Practice learning in social work education involves a complex interaction between students, practice teachers, tutors, educational institutions and agencies, and quality is viewable from a number of different perspectives. The main aim of this exploratory research, which involved Master in Social Work (MSW) students at Queen's University, Belfast, was to illuminate their perspective of standards of practice learning and consider how these might be further developed. This study was part of a larger comparative piece of research involving students from Trinity College, Dublin. By highlighting the students' perspective, the study aimed to contribute to academic debate about the significance of practice learning.

The paper begins with a review of recent developments in practice learning which have informed the aims and focus of the research, highlighting those factors particularly significant in the Northern Ireland context. The second section outlines the research methodology and reports on the key findings, which focused on the perceptions of MSW students at Queen's University about their experience of practice learning. The final part of the paper analyses the strengths and limitations of provision from the students' perspective and highlights for academic institutions and agencies the key implications of the research for developing practice learning.

Recent Developments in Practice Learning in the UK

The requirements underpinning the new qualifying degrees in the UK have emphasised the increased centrality of practice learning in social work education (GSSC, 2002; NISCC, 2003b; Parker, 2004). Placements, for example, are longer; 210 days supervised learning instead of 140 days under the previous system (NISCC, 2003b). The specification for the new degree also makes it clear that college based academic education should support and inform practice learning rather than the other way around (NISCC, 2003a). However, problems with providing sufficient quantity and quality of practice learning opportunities appear to have been endemic features of provision in Northern Ireland since the expansion of social work qualifying education and training in the 1970s (McCarthy & Walker, 1994). In addition, concerns have been expressed about the continuing hegemony of competence based approaches in its new degrees, reflecting the dominance of employer-led agendas, which have engendered bureaucratic and procedurally driven forms of practice in the UK (Pietroni, 1995; Preston-Shoot, 2004).

In the UK, the long history of concern about difficulties in providing sufficient quantity and quality of practice learning provision has been associated with deep-seated infrastructural problems, financial under-resourcing and recurring recruitment and retention problems with practice teachers (Karban, 1994; Rickford, 1996).

In re-emphasising the importance of practice learning, the introduction of the new degrees in social work has raised expectations that quantity can be delivered alongside the development of high quality provision (GSCC, 2002; NISCC, 2003a, 2003b). However, as Lefevre (2005) has highlighted, the increase in placement days has proved challenging for existing structures and rather than the traditional, one-to-one relationship between practice teachers and students, agencies have had to consider alternative approaches to providing practice learning.

While quality standards in practice learning have generally been under-researched, a number of writers have pointed to what might be the most significant constituent factors that need to be taken into account in exploring effectiveness (Thompson *et al.*, 1994; Ellison, 1994; Wilson, 2000; Knight, 2001). Along with the training and support available to practice teachers, these characteristics include consideration of both task and maintenance aspects of a student's practice learning experience (Lefevre, 2005). The key task aspects of practice learning are reflected in the broad areas in which post qualifying staff undertaking the Practice Teacher Award Course are expected to demonstrate competence including: teaching, facilitation, assessment, administration and management of the student's learning experience (CCETSW, 1997). Various writers have also emphasised the importance of the practice teacher's maintenance role in helping to ensure that students receive sufficient emotional support and nurturing in order to assist them in coping with demanding and often quite stressful working environments (Thompson *et al.*, 1994; Lefevre, 2005). Although a number of studies have indicated that students tend to view their practice learning as one of the most enjoyable features of their social work education, these also suggest that it can engender considerable anxiety (Rogers, 1996; Doel & Shardlow, 1996). In addition to the factors outlined, the nature and characteristics of the interpersonal relationship established between the student and practice teacher has been repeatedly highlighted as an important factor affecting the overall quality of practice learning (Gardiner, 1989; Lefevre, 2005). While different stakeholders within this relationship will have their own perspective on what constitutes the most significant aspects of quality, students occupy a particularly vulnerable position in practice learning and it is very important for all concerned to take account of their views and concerns (Thompson *et al.*, 1994; Parker, 2004).

The Northern Ireland Context

It has been observed that practice learning provision in Northern Ireland might have some advantages in comparison to other parts of the UK (Wilson, 2000). For example, Northern Ireland benefits from having a centralised, regionally managed and co-ordinated 'agency obligation' system of practice learning provision (Rogers, 1996; Wilson, 2000). These arrangements also contrast with the situation in the Republic of Ireland where relationships between academic institutions and agencies are much less formal and different course providers can approach individual practice teachers who generally have more autonomy about when and how many placements they provide. The centrally managed partnerships between academic institutions and

agencies in Northern Ireland provide a mechanism for helping to ensure effective provision and monitoring of quality standards. Although there have been problems in Northern Ireland with providing workload easement and high practice teaching turnover rates, a range of measures, including payments, have been introduced to try to address these difficulties, which have not been as severe as in other parts of the UK (Rea, 1994). All of Northern Ireland's practice teachers are qualified social workers and a very high proportion of these staff (81% in 1997) are also holders of a post qualifying award in practice teaching (McCarthy & Walker, 1994; CCETSW, 1997; Wilson, 2000).

Practice teaching in Northern Ireland is provided by agencies using two main models of delivery. Many placements are provided by 'singleton practice teachers' who are usually experienced staff employed as social work practitioners or first line managers within the placement setting. In recent years, with increasing demand for placements, some agencies have come to rely more on the 'long arm' model of practice teaching where the practice teacher usually works in an agency training team or is employed as an independent worker and may be responsible for several students at the one time (Wilson, 2000). In the 'long arm' model the practice teacher is not based within the placement setting but visits the agency and supervises in partnership with a practitioner/manager who provides a mechanism for 'on-site' support and accountability for the student.

Research Context

This research study was undertaken with students undertaking a two-year qualifying level MSW course at Queen's. A three-year Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) replaced the MSW programme in 2004. This development, which is perhaps untypical of other countries, resulted from a government decision that all social work qualifying level education in Northern Ireland should be at undergraduate level (NISCC, 2003a). With the introduction of the new BSW, postgraduate qualifications in social work in Northern Ireland are now reserved for staff undertaking post qualifying education courses.

In addition to a mix of generic and specialist teaching the competence based MSW included two assessed practice placements, both of 70 days duration. As part of the entrance criteria for the programme all MSW students were required to have at least six months previous experience of social work/social care although most had considerably more than this (Wilson & McCrystal, 2007). Students were required to produce a portfolio of evidence and self-evaluation report and practice teachers made a pass/fail recommendation of their competence based on their direct observation and assessment of all the evidence. The student pass rate for placements in the MSW programme was generally very good and during the period in which the research was undertaken the fail rate averaged less than 5%.

Research Aims

This exploratory study was part of a larger comparative piece of research which also involved students from Trinity College Dublin. This paper reports on the Northern

Ireland component of the study, which was undertaken with MSW students at Queen's University Belfast between 2002 and 2004. The research included three cohorts of students undertaking first or second year placements in a range of both statutory and voluntary sector agencies throughout Northern Ireland. By focusing on students' perceptions, one of the principal aims of this study was to develop a more grounded understanding of quality. The specific aims of the study were as follows:

- 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

A mixed methodology was employed in this study in order to try to ensure that the data collected were as representative as possible of student views. Some 139 MSW students (70%) at the School of Social Work, Queen's University of Belfast, completed a questionnaire at the end of their placement. A group interview was undertaken with 12 students in order to pilot the questionnaire and ensure that the content was pertinent from the students' perspective. In the light of feedback from students, a question was added to the survey about college preparation for placement and several other small amendments were made.

The research questionnaire was shared and its purpose explained to students at meetings with them following completion of placements and after pass/fail results had been issued. The questionnaire consisted of four sections and was designed to cover key aspects of the students' experience of practice learning as well as reflect the main tasks that practice teachers are expected to undertake in facilitating and supporting them (CCETSW, 1997). Section A consisted of 13 questions covering the demographic characteristics of the sample, the type of setting in which they had been placed and the students' perspectives on their preparation for placement whilst in college. Section B contained seven questions and focused on the students' experience of induction and preparation in the placement prior to undertaking direct work with service users. Section C consisted of 15 questions aimed at eliciting information on their view of the quality of learning opportunities and support they had received during placement. Finally, Section D had 19 questions on students' experience of the assessment process and their views about the learning outcomes they had achieved through undertaking practice learning. The data from the questionnaires were coded and analysed using SPSS version 10 for Windows computer package.

Preliminary findings from the questionnaire were then shared with 12 students, who had competed first placements, during a further group interview in order to seek their views and add further depth to the study. The data obtained from this interview were analysed using a process of content analysis, which helped to highlight significant themes and issues from the students' perspective.

Limitations of the Study

The main limitation of the study was that it only focused on students' perceptions of practice learning, which are necessarily subjective and in this research were not externally verified. In addition, while respondents had undertaken placements in a wide variety of agencies across Northern Ireland, the research was conducted with students from only one academic institution. A more comprehensive investigation of the quality of provision would require the consideration of the views of students, practice teachers, tutors and where applicable 'on-site' staff across a range of academic institutions and agencies in Northern Ireland. At the same time, as indicated earlier, students are central to the debate about quality in practice learning and previously there has been a lack of empirical research focusing on their perspective.

This study did not specifically seek demographic information about the race or religion of students who completed questionnaires. However, previous studies have indicated that whilst social work programmes in Northern Ireland attract recruits from both the Protestant and Catholic communities, which are predominantly white, most are from the minority Catholic community with very few students coming from black/ethnic minority groups (Campbell & Healy, 1999; Wilson & McCrystal, 2007). The centralised system of placement allocation in Northern Ireland, which restricts or hinders international placements, might also militate against the inclusion in practice learning of a more diverse group of students from other parts of the UK or other countries.

A number of factors including, for example, whether students successfully completed a placement, the quality of their relationship with the practice teacher and previous contact with the researcher, might also have biased their perspectives, positively or negatively. However, the high response rate to the questionnaire, which was anonymised, coupled with the triangulation provided by the group interviews, provided some reassurance about the validity of the findings.

Although practice learning in the new BSW degree has similarities to the MSW there are differences, including longer placements and different practice requirements. Nonetheless, many of the key features of practice learning explored in the research, such as student perceptions of practice teacher support and supervision, are relevant to the development of the BSW. Clearly, there are also significant differences between Northern Ireland and other countries including, for example, the terminology used to describe practice learning and teaching and in the manner in which this is organised and delivered. Despite such differences, the process in many countries is essentially the same: that of the social work student spending a substantial amount of time in agency-based education, placed with one or more experienced practitioners, learning about and through practice. While some findings might not be easily generalisable, it is hoped that the results which relate to these essential characteristics of the students' experience are relevant not only in identifying directions for future research in Northern Ireland but also in helping to inform developments in other countries where practice learning is a significant feature of social work education.

Findings

Demographic Characteristics of MSW Students

Some 84% of MSW students in the sample were female and over two thirds of respondents (69%) were aged under 30. Only 9% of students were aged 40 or over. All students possessed an undergraduate degree, mainly in the social sciences. Twenty-two students held postgraduate degrees which included eight with a masters degree and two with a PhD. Eighty-three students (59%) had separate paid employment when undertaking their placements with 34% of this total working 10 hours or less, 49% between 10 and 20 hours, and the remaining 17% working more than 20 hours per week.

Placement Settings and Satisfaction with Learning Opportunities

The majority of students (76) were undertaking first placements, 62 had second placements and one student was in a repeat second placement having failed one previously. While 42% of students obtained fieldwork placements, 28% were placed in residential and 17% in day care settings, which would seem to substantiate Barron's (2004) observation about the trend towards more social care type placements in Northern Ireland. The majority of students (63%) had long-arm practice teachers, mainly employed by training teams, and the remaining 37% were singletons, mainly social work practitioners. Table 1 indicates that students were placed with a variety of different client groups and settings. Significantly, while most jobs following qualification tend to be in the family and child care programmes, Table 1 shows that the latter only accounted for around one fifth of placements.

Students were asked to indicate, on a five-point Likert scale, how satisfied they were with the preparation they had received in college for placement. The majority (63%) were satisfied or very satisfied with their preparation and 21% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. Students undertaking second placements who had received an intensive programme of knowledge and skills teaching tailored to the specific area of placement practice (SAP) were generally more positive about their preparation than those undertaking first year placements who had received more generic preparation.

Table 1 Placement Settings (Client Groups)

Area	Total (%)
Family and child care	23
Learning disability	23
Mental health	14
Older people	13
Physical health & disability	11
Criminal justice	8
Other settings	8

The following comment from one first year student was typical in highlighting the need for

> more time to focus on portfolio building and skills essential to placement.

The overwhelming majority of students (87%) were either satisfied or very satisfied with the learning opportunities they were provided with on placement. Only a very small number (3%) expressed dissatisfaction with learning opportunities. Over two thirds of students (69%) were satisfied or very satisfied with the induction programme provided by the agency for direct work with service users and 13% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

Satisfaction with Supervision and Support from Practice Teacher

Some 70% of students were satisfied or very satisfied with the supervision and support received from practice teachers (Table 2); however, a significant minority were dissatisfied (10%) or very dissatisfied (11%). While there were no significant differences between students' overall levels of satisfaction with 'long-arm' and singleton practice teachers, there were some differences with specific aspects of supervision. For example, the majority of students (67%) were satisfied or very satisfied with practice teachers' facilitation in helping them to link theory to practice. However, whereas 41% of students with 'long-arm' practice teachers were very satisfied, only 16% of students with singletons had the same level of satisfaction.

A number of students commented on the importance of the very positive working relationship they had developed with practice teachers during placement. For example, one student commented that:

> My PT was excellent and made herself available to me—supervision was very supportive and we developed a great relationship.

Other students highlighted the importance of the role played by practice teachers in compensating for deficiencies they experienced with other aspects of their placement:

> My practice teacher and on-site (supervisor) were very supportive throughout placement, however, I did experience difficulties with the team.

However, it was evident that some students had experienced a very poor relationship with their practice teacher. One student, for example, reported that their

Table 2 Satisfaction with Supervision and Support from Practice Teacher

Satisfaction level	% of students
Very satisfied	51
Satisfied	19
Neither satisfied or dissatisfied	6
Dissatisfied	10
Very dissatisfied	11

PT was not supportive. When I informed her of feeling not confident she didn't reassure me. Didn't know what to say to me, joked about failing my work which was not helpful.

As a corollary to the scenario outlined above, several students indicated that other factors on their placement had compensated for problems in their relationship with the practice teachers. For example, one student commented that:

My on-site supervisor and other staff members were excellent in providing support—especially in light of poor supervision from practice teacher.

While the role of tutors was not a major focus in this research, a large majority of students (76%) stated that they were either satisfied or very satisfied with the support they had received from university staff. However, a small number felt that more contact with both tutors and the university, through additional recall days, would have enhanced the support and learning they had experienced on placement.

Students were asked to what extent they were treated on placement as adult learners. The majority of students felt they had been either often (17%) or always (59%) treated in this way, 18% said only sometimes, 4% stated seldom and one student felt they had never been treated as an adult learner. Some 66% of students reported that their learning style had been both identified by their practice teacher and used with them in supervision; 23% of students said it had not been used and 9% were unsure. Similarly, the majority (74%) of students stated that their practice teacher had helped them to become more self-directing during the placement with 13% saying they had not been helped in this way and a further 12% were unsure.

Frequency and Length of Supervision Sessions

While 84% of students had weekly supervision throughout the placement, 10% had fortnightly supervision and the remainder reported no regular pattern. The students were also asked to estimate the average length of their supervision sessions with practice teachers throughout the placement. Whilst a small majority of students (53%) averaged two hours in supervision, there were some significant variations between placements. For example, 28% of students had supervision for two and a half hours and 14% for one and a half hours per week throughout the placement. While most students were satisfied with the availability of their practice teachers, some had more negative experiences as reflected in the following comments:

Sometimes I felt my PT didn't have time for me.

Practice teacher was not always available and supervision was not always regular.

Facilitation of Learning/Use of Learning Tools in Supervision

During their training practice teachers are encouraged to use a variety of tools and approaches to help facilitate student learning (CCETSW, 1997). Table 3 shows the

Table 3 Use of Learning Tools

Learning tools	% frequency of use
Process records	88
Modelling	33
Rehearsal	13
Role-play	10
Video tape	14
Audio tape	9

range and frequency of learning tools that students reported practice teachers had employed.

The extensive use of process records indicated in Table 3 is not surprising in that students were expected to provide these as evidence in their portfolio. Some 33% of students had experienced the use of 'modelling' which usually involved them in observing their practice teachers demonstrating social work practice in direct work with service users. Significantly, singletons (55%) were more likely than 'long-arm' practice teachers (19%) to use modelling. This finding could be explained by the greater opportunities available to singletons, given their job roles, to act as role models in direct practice with service users in comparison with many 'long-arm' practice teachers whose work might mainly be in training. Overall, very few students reported experiencing the use of other learning approaches such as role-play and rehearsal.

Factors Guiding Students' Practice

Students were asked to rank in order from a list of options the factors that they felt had been most important in guiding their practice. Nearly half of MSW students identified social work values as the single most important factor. Social work theory and anti-oppressive practice were rated significantly lower than agency policy and procedures as most important factors. Some students suggested that there had been an element of tokenism towards anti-oppressive practice and that in some placements, because it had not been an integral part of practice culture, there had been an artificiality about arranging learning opportunities:

> I think the presence of a student makes people suddenly thing of AOP in a really very obvious way—that is almost oppressive and discriminatory in itself.

> This one's great because this person has this and this and this and that would be really good for your ADP!

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 felt their practice teachers' expectations were about right, the majority believed expectations had been high (34%) or very high (29%) with only 2% feeling these had

been low. The findings indicated some differences between students' perceptions of 'long-arm' and singleton practice teachers' expectations. For example, whereas 36% of students with 'long-arm' practice teachers rated their expectations very high, only 18% of those with singletons did so.

In order to explore further the issue of practice teacher expectations, students were asked to identify how frequently they were required to produce written reflective evaluations for supervision purposes. While nearly two thirds of students were asked to do so either often (33%) or always (28%), a total of 24% were asked sometimes, 6% only seldom and 8% were never asked. Once again, there were some differences between students with singletons and those with 'long-arm' practice teachers. For example, whereas 14% of students with singletons reported that they were always expected to produce written evaluations for supervision, 36% of those with 'long-arm' practice teachers were required to do so.

The findings highlighted the tendency among students to compare and contrast their practice learning experiences with each other. Some students expressed concern that their practice teachers had required them to do too much work in comparison with their peers. For example, one student said:

> what I had to include in my portfolio was above and beyond what was needed. It was my PT's portfolio not mine!

While under similar pressure to produce work for practice teachers other students had a more positive view of the benefits of such endeavours:

> Although it required constant work I felt that this enabled me to constantly look deeper at my practice and really learn from it.

Students were asked to rate the level of anxiety they had experienced during the placement. While 46% of students rated this as low to medium, a total of 24% had experienced high levels of anxiety and 25% very high levels. As already indicated, some student anxieties seemed to focus on interpersonal relationship issues with practice teachers and others. Feedback from students suggested that compilation of evidence for the portfolio was another major source of stress and concern. The following was typical of student comments:

> Placement is dominated by portfolio from beginning to end. This places the student under immense stress and pressure and the placement becomes an intense, wearing experience.

Some students suggested that the quest to gather evidence for the portfolio had detracted from placement learning:

> Portfolios are a huge task and hindered the last half of the placement—it was so focused on the portfolio that you ruin some excellent learning opportunities.

Perspectives on Assessment and Competence Achieved

The large majority of students were clear (51%) or very clear (29%) about the criteria and standards they were being assessed against during placement. Some 16% were

Table 4 Satisfaction with Accuracy of Practice Teacher's Assessment Report

Satisfaction level	% of students
Very satisfied	33
Satisfied	49
Neither satisfied or dissatisfied	10
Dissatisfied	5
Very dissatisfied	3

unclear and only 3% were very unclear about assessment criteria. As indicated in Table 4, over four-fifths (82%) of students were also satisfied or very satisfied that their practice teacher's report was an accurate reflection of their learning and development with only (8%) dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their assessment.

Students were asked to rate the level of competence they felt they had achieved during placement: 76% rated themselves as competent and 9% felt they were very competent. A minority of students (12%) were unsure about what level of competence they had achieved and 2% felt they were not very competent. The overwhelming majority of students were also clear (49%) or very clear (39%) about their strengths and future learning needs.

Suggestions for Improving Practice Learning

Finally, students were asked for suggestions on how practice placements could be developed: a frequent comment concerned the need to increase the length of placements:

> Placements should be longer—quality of learning could be vastly improved if students had more time to develop practice.

A small number of students were disappointed about the placement they had been allocated and felt placement choice needed to be improved.

Perhaps the most frequent concerns and suggestions for improvement focussed on the need to change the system of providing evidence through portfolios. 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.

A small number of students made suggestions for replacing portfolios with other methods of assessment. For example, one student suggested:

> more oral input from PT, colleagues and supervisors to highlight progress of student.

Discussion

The results demonstrated that the MSW students who participated in the research are already a very well qualified group with significant numbers possessing postgraduate

academic awards. The results confirm findings reported elsewhere in the UK about the lesser representation of male students in social work courses (Perry & Cree, 2003). The finding that many students worked in paid employment during placement is a worrying factor given the intensive and demanding nature of social work training. However, this result probably simply reflects the reality of student poverty and the need for many students to work in order to support both themselves and dependents.

The findings demonstrated that MSW students were able to access a variety of placement settings across a range of client groups and reassuringly the overwhelming majority were satisfied or very satisfied with the learning opportunities they had been allocated. There were fewer students placed in family and child care than might have been anticipated given that most social work jobs tend to be available in this programme for qualified staff. This finding possibly reflects the particular difficulty this sector has experienced in both recruiting and retaining staff. Ironically, it might be that the very sector where new social workers are most needed is less able to offer student practice learning experience because of work pressures resulting from staff shortages (Wilson & McCrystal, 2007).

While most students were satisfied with their college preparation for the placement the finding that a significant minority were not is concerning. Most negative comments in this area were from first year placement students and generally second placement students appeared more satisfied with the intensive specialist preparation they received. This has been an area of concern in other programmes and the inclusion of a full module of skills and placement preparation in the first year of the new social work degree should help to address this issue (NISCC, 2003b).

While the data from the research showed that the majority of students were satisfied with the quality of the supervision and support received from practice teachers and the way they had been treated as adult learners, it also indicated that a significant minority were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. This finding cannot be fully explained by students failing placements as the numbers involved here were much smaller. The percentage of students dissatisfied with their practice teachers (21% overall) in this research is in fact remarkably similar to the findings of a study of student views completed by Rosenblatt & Mayer (1975) over 30 years ago. There were also similarities in the finding that most negative comments from students tended to focus on problems with the interpersonal relationship between students and practice teachers. The evidence of this study would therefore support Lefevre's (2005) view about the centrality of this relationship in delivering high quality practice learning. As Lefevre (2005) argues, 'Attending to the affective and dynamic elements of the supervisory, assessment and teaching relationship can facilitate the creation of a supportive, safe and trusting environment in which student learning is facilitated' (p. 580). However, the results of this study suggested that while the relationship with practice teachers is important the relationships that students develop with other stakeholders in the placement, including on-site supervisors, is significant and might even compensate for deficiencies in other aspects of the placement. Additional research, involving all stakeholders involved in practice learning, would be required in order to investigate this finding further.

While overall, the results indicated that most students were satisfied with the supervision and support they had received from practice teachers, the study found some differences in perception about specific aspects of supervision between those placed with singleton and those with 'long-arm' practice teachers. The differences found, for example, in relation to modelling, facilitation of theory and expectations relating to production of written evaluations for supervision might reflect differences in orientation between practice teachers. One possible explanation is that some 'long-arm' practice teachers may be more focused on the learning aspects of the student's experience of placement in comparison with some singletons. However, a more comprehensive research study, which would also involve practice teachers directly, would be required in order to explore this issue more fully.

The evidence from the findings indicated that there was significant variation in the length of supervision sessions and some differences in frequency. However, we should perhaps not read too much into these findings as a study by Fortune *et al.* (1985) for example, found that quality is more important than the quantity of supervision. Nevertheless, some students did express concerns about the lack of availability of some practice teachers. This is worrying in the context of the generally high levels of anxiety reported by students. The lack of availability of a key person who can provide reassurance, like the practice teacher, could obviously serve to both exacerbate and contribute to stress. High levels of anxiety were so prevalent in this study as to be considered normative and it is clearly important that all students obtain as much support and understanding as possible in order to prevent the resulting stress adversely affecting their learning (Gardiner, 1989). Ensuring the provision of appropriate levels of emotional support and nurturing might be even more important in the new degree where students entering the programme may have considerably less previous experience of social work than MSW students (Edwards & Richards, 2002).

The evidence indicated that practice teachers make extensive use of learning tools such as process records, and to a lesser extent modelling, in order to help facilitate student learning. However, the finding that relatively few students reported having experienced role-play and rehearsal tools in practice learning is less satisfactory. It is disappointing that more practice teachers were not applying such creative and imaginative learning tools as these are very useful methods of facilitating learning and are approaches they would be encouraged to use during their training (Thompson *et al.*, 1994). Clearly, this is an issue which would benefit from being further researched directly with practice teachers.

Fairness and transparency of assessment are among the positive strengths which are claimed for competence-based approaches to learning (O'Hagan, 1996). The findings would support this contention as the large majority of MSW students in this study were very positive about these aspects of their experience and most felt they had achieved a satisfactory level of competence during their placement.

The evidence in this study that students rated highly agency policy and procedures among the main factors guiding their practice seems to be consistent with the view that procedural and technocratic forms of social work tend to dominate in Northern

Ireland (Houston & McCulloch, 2001). The finding that fewer students tended to rank anti-oppressive practice as highly as a factor guiding their practice and that some felt there was an element of tokenism in some agencies is concerning. Further research involving practice teachers and agencies would be necessary in order to investigate and explore both these matters and their implications more comprehensively.

One of the most frequently mentioned suggestions by students for improving practice learning—the need to increase the length of placements—has been incorporated into the new degree. Students were also very critical of the laborious and time-consuming nature of having to gather evidence for portfolios and the tendency for this process to detract from direct work with service users and learning in general. However, some commentators have already expressed doubts about whether the approach to demonstrating competence in practice learning in the new social work degree will be any more streamlined than the previous portfolio approach (Preston-Shoot, 2004).

Conclusion

The findings from this study provide indications of the strengths and limitations of practice learning provision in Northern Ireland. MSW students were generally very positive about many important aspects of provision, including the quality of learning opportunities, supervision, and support from practice teachers and the quality of the learning outcomes they had achieved. However, the study also raises some significant issues of relevance for developing the new degree and identifies a number of specific areas for future research. These include the impact on the student learning process of variations in the use of learning tools; the differences resulting from on-site and long arm arrangements; tokenism in relation to values and the problems associated with assembling portfolios and producing evidence of competence. Further research in these areas involving other key stakeholders including practice teachers, tutors and on-site supervisors would help to further clarify the most significant aspects of quality in practice learning and the key factors that characterise functional from dysfunctional learning environments. Clearly, practice learning in the UK is continuing to evolve and what constitutes and defines quality in this context might change. Given the reflexive nature of practice learning, taking into account the views of students, alongside those of other key stakeholders involved in the process should help to ensure that quality standards continue to develop in future.

References

Barron, C. (2004) 'Fair play: creating a better learning climate for social work students in social care settings', *Social Work Education*, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 25–37.
Campbell, J. & Healy, A. (1999) 'Whatever you say, say something: the education, training and practice of mental health social workers in Northern Ireland', *Social Work Education*, vol. 18, no. 4, pp. 389–400.

CCETSW (1997) *Northern Ireland: Review of the Northern Ireland Practice Teacher Training Programme 1990–1996*, unpublished report to DHSS Inspectorate.

Doel, M. & Shardlow, S. (1996) *Social Work in a Changing World: An International Perspective on Practice Learning*, Ashgate Publishing Company.

Edwards, J. & Richards, A. (2002) 'Relational teaching: a view of relational teaching in social work education', *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, vol. 22, no. 1/2, pp. 33–48.

Ellison, M. L. (1994) 'Critical field instructor behaviours: student and field instructor views', *Arete*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 12–21.

Fortune, A., Feathers, C., Rook, S., Scrimenti, R., Smollen, P., Stemerman, B. & Tachu, E. (1985) 'Student satisfaction with field placement', *Journal of Social Work Education*, vol. 21, no. 3, pp. 92–104.

Gardiner, D. (1989) *The Anatomy of Supervision: Developing Learning and Professional Competence for Social Work Students*, SRHE/Open University Press.

GSCC (2002) *Guidance on the Assessment of Practice in the Workplace*, General Social Care Council, England.

Houston, S. & McCullough, W. (2001) 'Introduction', in *Social Work and Innovation: An Anthology of Advanced Level Practice*, CCETSW, Belfast.

Karban, K. (1994) 'Where's teacher?', *Community Care*, 8 September.

Knight, C. (2001) 'The process of field instruction: BSW and MSW students' views of effective field supervision', *Journal of Social Work Education*, vol. 37, no. 2, pp. 357–380.

Lefevre, M. (2005) 'Facilitating practice learning assessment: the influence of relationship', *Social Work Education*, vol. 24, no. 5, pp. 565–583.

McCarthy, P. & Walker, J. (1994) *CCETSW: UK Audit of Practice Placements 1992–1993*, University of Newcastle.

NISCC (2003a) *The Reform of Professional Social Work Training: The Degree in Social Work in Northern Ireland*, Northern Ireland Social Care Council, Belfast.

NISCC (2003b) *Practice Learning Requirements for the Degree in Social Work*, Northern Ireland Social Care Council, Belfast.

O'Hagan, K. (1996) *Competence in Social Work Practice*, Jessica Kingsley, London.

Parker, J. (2004) *Effective Practice Learning in Social Work*, Learning Matters Ltd, Exeter.

Perry, R. W. & Cree, V. E. (2003) 'The changing gender profile of applicants to qualifying social work training in the UK', *Social Work Education*, vol. 22, no. 4, pp. 375–383.

Pietroni, M. (1995) 'The nature and aims of professional education for social workers. A postmodern perspective', in *Learning and Teaching in Social Work: Towards Reflective Practice*, eds M. Yelloly & M. Henkel, Jessica Kingsley, London.

Preston-Shoot, M. (2004) 'Responding by degrees: surveying the education and practice landscape', *Social Work Education*, vol. 23, no. 6, pp. 667–692.

Rea, E. (1994) *Practice Placements Study*, Department of Health and Social Services, Northern Ireland.

Rickford, F. (1996) 'Practice makes perfect', *Community Care*, 10 October.

Rogers, G. (1996) 'The voices of practice teachers in Britain & Canada: comparing views after training', *Issues in Social Work Education*, vol. 16, no. 1, Spring.

Rosenblatt, A. & Mayer, J. (1975) 'Objectionable supervisory styles: student views', *Social Casework*, vol. 59, no. 3, pp. 131–137.

Thompson, N., Osada, M. & Anderson, B. (1994) *Practice Teaching in Social Work*, 2nd edn, PEPAR, Birmingham.

Wilson, G. (2000) 'Developing practice learning: the practice teachers' perspective', *Journal of Practice Teaching in Health and Social Work*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 44–62.

Wilson, G. & McCrystal, P. (2007) 'Motivations and career aspirations of MSW students in Northern Ireland', *Social Work Education*, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 35–52.