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Published online: 16 Jan 2025.

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Practice education in social work: a scoping review of existing research

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ABSTRACT

Practice learning is central to the pedagogy of social work education; it enables students to link theory and practice, and supports them to develop the knowledge, skills, and behaviors required to enter the profession. In England, practice educators—experienced qualified social workers who have undertaken relevant training—are responsible for providing learning opportunities and assessing students' practice learning. This article outlines a scoping review of research on practice education in the United Kingdom (UK). Thirty-seven empirical studies based in the UK were identified, covering four aspects of practice education: working with students, relationships and emotional labor, the practice education system, and the wider context of practice education. This review highlights that practice educators manage a complex array of relationships and demands placed upon them, whilst working at the interface of competing conceptions of social work. Research indicates there is often limited recognition and support for practice educators, and this lack of attention is reflected in relatively scant research on the experiences of practice educators and the skills required for the role. Greater recognition and support are needed to sustain the practice educator workforce, and more research is required to better understand the needs and experiences of practice educators.

Introduction

Practice education plays a vital part in equipping social work students with the knowledge and skills required to support their safe entry into the profession. The role of practice placements in supporting students to integrate theory and practice is recognized as central to the pedagogical approach of social work education internationally (Earls Larrison & Korr, 2013; McGuire & Lay, 2020). To learn how to be a social worker, social work students need opportunities for active, practice-based learning and time and space to reflect upon their experiences and embed their learning (Earls Larrison & Korr, 2013; McGuire & Lay, 2020).

Students in England are required by the professional regulator, Social Work England, to undertake 200 days of practice learning, at least 170 of which will be in work-based placements supported by a practice educator, with up to 30 days being used by education providers as skills days (Social Work England, 2021). Practice educators must be qualified, experienced social workers who have been in practice for at least two years and who have evidenced their ability to support adult learners (BASW, 2022). The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) provides a framework for the training and accreditation of practice educators, the Practice Educator Professional Standards (PEPS); to fully qualify as a practice educator, social workers must supervise the learning of two learners and demonstrate that they have met the requirements of the PEPS fully (BASW, 2022). There have been recent moves toward better understanding and supporting practice education in England; alongside the refresh of the PEPS in 2022, Social Work England has been involved in comprehensively reviewing the provision of practice learning and assessment (Social Work England, 2024).

The role of practice educator is complex; it involves balancing supportive and educative functions with responsibility for assessment of the student's practice. Practice educators must ensure that students have adequate learning opportunities, observe students' practice, provide reflective supervision, and formally assess students' progress at midway and the end of placement. Practice educators either work in social work organizations and provide on-site support to students or are self-employed or independent and provide off-site support (Waterhouse et al., 2011), with an on-site supervisor overseeing students' day-to-day work. Off-site practice educators are usually used when students are placed in teams or organizations that are not made up of qualified social workers, or where there is no qualified practice educator within the placement team.

In England, there are several qualifying routes for social workers; these include undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, degree apprenticeships, and fast-track routes (Smith, 2024). Whilst these courses all have to be accredited and meet Social Work England's training standards (Social Work England, 2021), there are differences in course structure and the demographics and needs of students on different qualifying routes, and significantly higher levels of funding on offer for fast-track programs (Hanley, 2019; Smith, 2024).

There are a range of commonalities between the practice education landscape in England and internationally; for example, other countries also commonly use off-site practice educators (Zuchowski, 2016). Other international studies have highlighted the central role that practice learning plays in promoting readiness to practice (Beddoe et al., 2018). More generally, there is consensus across international contexts that supervision—a key facet of the practice educator–student relationship—is a valuable site for reflection, learning, and development (Beddoe et al., 2016).

Despite the pedagogical importance of practice learning to social work as an international profession (Earls Larrison & Korr, 2013; McGuire & Lay, 2020) and despite the complexity of being a practice educator (Lane, 2023), there is a perception that the role is under-valued (Domakin, 2015; Haworth, 2019). This article presents findings from a scoping review of empirical research on practice education in the United Kingdom (UK).

Methods

The scoping review was undertaken by a team of three researchers as part of a wider research project on practice learning and assessment in England. Scoping reviews are appropriate when seeking to map existing literature in relation to a topic; a scoping review approach was therefore appropriate for the purposes of the project (Mak & Thomas, 2022). Using researchers from different disciplines is good practice in conducting scoping reviews (Daudt et al., 2013). Mak and Thomas (2022) suggest that teams undertaking scoping reviews should include at least one subject matter expert, which was the case for this review (two social worker researchers, one psychology researcher). The research team identified the following research questions:

(1) What are practice educators' experiences of practice education, including barriers and challenges they face?
(2) What sustains and motivates practice educators in their role?
(3) What knowledge and skills do practice educators need and how do they use this within their role?

Mak and Thomas (2022) note the importance of having clear research questions when undertaking a scoping review, and the questions enabled the research team to focus on core areas of practice education while being broad enough to ensure that key practice education research was unlikely to be missed.

A preliminary search was undertaken using the university's advanced library search tool, which accesses over 300 databases and repositories for academic journal articles, including Scopus, EBSCO, and JSTOR. Search terms used Boolean operators to ensure thoroughness; the combined terms were 'Practice teaching or practice learning or practice education or practice placement or practice assessment' in the abstract, with the second term being 'Social work or social work education or social workers or student social workers or trainee social workers' within the subject. The initial search yielded 28,402 hits.

Further criteria were added to narrow the search: the search was limited to peer-reviewed empirical articles published post-2000 in English, based in the UK and Ireland, reducing the number of hits to 1,375. Articles post-2000 were chosen due to changes in the profession around this time, including the Care Standards Act 2000 requiring social workers to register with a regulator, followed by the institution of the social work degree in 2003. Titles and abstracts of the 1,375 articles were screened for relevance, and duplicates were removed, reducing the number of articles to 112. After further detailed abstract screening, the number of articles was reduced to 27. Further hand searching was carried out to ensure thoroughness (Aveyard, 2014); this included screening reference lists from the 27 identified articles and manually searching key journals. This increased the number of articles to 50. At each stage, the research team cross-checked each other's decision-making to ensure consistency in the selection process (Daudt et al., 2013; Mak & Thomas, 2022). The articles were divided between the research team (Daudt et al., 2013) and full text reads then took place; 37 articles were included in the review.

Of the articles included in the review, 22 were based on qualitative data, 2 used solely quantitative methods, and 13 used mixed methods. Qualitative methods used were

a combination of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and workshops. Quantitative methods were questionnaires and textual analysis. Mixed methods generally involved either questionnaires that included both quantitative and qualitative questions and responses or a combination of questionnaires with focus groups or interviews. Many studies included other stakeholders—such as university tutors, students, and placement providers—as well as practice educators; some included studies did not collect data from practice educators, but findings had clear implications for the practice educator role and so were deemed relevant for inclusion.

The included articles were summarized in a table for analysis (Mak & Thomas, 2022). Analysis took place by coding summarized findings of the studies, these codes were then reviewed to identify patterns that were then developed into themes, and the themes were then grouped under broader categories. This type of thematic analysis is commonly used in scoping reviews (Mak & Thomas, 2022). The analysis yielded four categories with at least two themes in each category. The different experiences of the research team were useful for comparison and cross-checking of interpretations of the literature (Daudt et al., 2013; Mak & Thomas, 2022).

An alphabetical list of the articles selected for inclusion and their sample and methods can be found below in Table 1.

Alt text: A table listing the articles selected for inclusion, along with a brief description of the sample and methods used.

Findings

The empirical literature relating to practice education in England was divided into four categories: working with students, relationships and emotional labor, the practice education system, and the wider context of practice education. These categories, and the themes identified within them, will be considered in turn.

Working with students

Practice educators reported that supporting students was a key motivator for them to become and remain practice educators, and the literature reinforces that practice educators play a vital role in supporting students on placement (Bates, 2018; Rawles, 2021). Other key components of the practice educator role include identifying and developing students' skills and working with diversity and difference.

Supporting students

Practice educators described developing their skills as educators and enjoying supporting students as being their main intrinsic motivations to train to become practice educators (Develin & Mathews, 2012). However, trainee practice educators expressed ambivalence toward social work, feeling a sense of disillusionment toward the profession whilst simultaneously wanting to give back to it (Develin & Mathews, 2012). Helping to support the next generation of social workers was one of the ways in which trainee practice educators could feel they were making a difference.

Table 1. Summary of study samples and methods.

Study	Sample and methods
Apeah-Kubi (2021)	14 trainee practice educators. Analysis of quality assurance of practice learning (QAPL) form, both quantitative and qualitative and Likert scale questions. Thematic analysis of final 'open text' question.
Bailey McHale et al. (2019)	13 social work students. 6 practice educators. Visual methods and focus groups. Students drew idealised practice educator and practice educator focus group reflected on what these drawings meant. Drawings and transcribed discussions were analysed thematically.
Basnett and Sheffield (2010)	8 practice educators. Semi-structured interviews, transcribed and then analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis.
Bates (2018)	6 practice educators. Semi-structed interviews. Thematic analysis supported by 'indexing data' framework.
Beesley and Taplin (2022)	Approximately 70 social work educators, placement providers, and practice educators. Empirical data is drawn from two workshops held at national social work and social work education conferences. The discussion from these workshops has been analysed using thematic analysis.
Brodie and Coyle (2015)	35 practice educators for survey. 16 practice educators ($n=8$) and students ($n=8$) for interviews. Questionnaire and semi- structured personal communication
Burton (2020)	12 practice educators. Small group interviews, individual interviews 6 months later. Thematic analysis of data.
Collins et al. (2000)	40 first placement reports from postgraduate students. Documentary analysis of placement reports with a focus on discussion of racism and anti-racism.
Develin and Mathews (2012)	50 surveys and 2 focus groups – participant numbers low, but not revealed. Questionnaire and focus groups.
Doel et al. (2007)	71 in total, 39 agency-based practice educators, 16 independent practice educators, and 16 university-based tutors. Questionnaires collecting quantitative and qualitative data.
Domakin (2014)	48 practice educators. Questionnaire with closed and open-ended questions, using Likert scale and free text. Analysis through grounded theory.
Domakin (2015)	11 practice educators. 2 focus groups.
Finch (2017)	Four placement assessment panels where 9 students assessed as failing were discussed. Ethnographic study using non- participant observation. Field notes were taken and where permission was given, panel meetings were audio recorded and transcribed.
Finch and Taylor (2013)	20 practice educators. Narrative-style interviews. Data analysed using voice-centred relational method, findings synthesised thematically.
Finch et al. (2014)	Study 1–20 practice educators. Study 2–15 practice educators and tutors. Study 1: In-depth qualitative interviews. Study 2: Semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Indicates the use of thematic analysis.
Furness (2012)	16 practice educators. Semi-structured interviews.
Furness and Gilligan (2004)	70 practice educators. Draws on discussions from a conference workshop.
Gibson (2012)	One student. Autoethnography using narrative methods.
Haanwinckel et al. (2018)	17 practice educators. Semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed thematically.
Haworth (2019)	6 local authorities. Small scale scoping exercises and face to face interviews within the Teaching Partnership.
Henderson (2010)	8 practice educators and 7 on-site supervisors. Mixed methods, postal survey followed by semi-structured interview.
Higgins (2014)	48 participants – included academics, practice educators, practice leads, students, and service users. Interviews and focus groups, analysed thematically.
Higgins et al. (2016)	48 participants (10 academics, 2 university practice learning leads, 8 practice educators, 17 students, and 11 service users). Individual interviews at two time points with the academics, practice learning leads and practice educators. 4 focus groups were held, three for students and one for service users. Data analysed thematically.

Table 1. (Continued).

Study	Sample and methods
Jasper and Field (2016)	43 practice educators.
	Semi-structured questionnaire with Likert-scale and open text, plus focus group. Data thematically analysed.
Lane (2023)	35 participants, including practice educators, practitioners, and service users (adults only).
	Semi-structured interviews. States that underpinning framework is interpretive phenomenology.
Lefevre (2005)	44 social work students.
	Questionnaire with both quantitative and qualitative data. Open and ranking Likert scale questions.
Lister and Crisp (2007)	10 postgraduate social work students and their practice educators.
	Semi-structured interviews with students at midpoint and end of placement. Interviews with two practice educators (who supported six of the students) also took place.
Mathews et al. (2009)	36 students for questionnaire, 9 students for interviews.
	Questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.
Keen et al. (2010)	Tender documents (n=15), interim pilot project reports (n=150), final project reports (n=13), programme materials (n=14), and candidate feedback forms (n=49). Informal telephone or email consultations with 12 course providers and 12 employers.
	Documentary analysis of documents, conversations analysed though methods of analysis not articulated.
Plenty and Gower (2013)	48 practice educators.
	6 focus groups and mixed methods questionnaire.
Plenty et al. (2016)	30 practice educators, 4 on site supervisors, 3 placement providers, 6 academic tutors.
	Online questionnaire using a Likert Scale. Further qualitative questions asked participants to elaborate on answers.
Rawles (2021)	14 social work students.
	Semi-structured interview. Hermeneutic phenomenological methodology.
Roulston et al. (2022)	11 social work students. Placement reports for the students were also used to gain perspective of practice educator.
	Semi-structured interviews and analysis of placement reports. Data analysis took place using thematic analysis.
Stone (2016)	17 practice educators.
	Semi-structured interviews and focus group. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.
Thomas et al. (2010)	Approximately 60 (focus group = 6 student, 3 practice educators, 1 placement supervisor; conference workshop = 50 practice educators and placement supervisors).
	Focus groups, mentor support and a practice learning conference.
Torry et al. (2005)	Responses from 6 social work agencies.
	Mixed-methods study. 9 semi-structured interviews with key personnel from placement agencies. Questionnaire, answered by 30 practice educators that were supervising students on the programme. A focus groups was also held.
Waterhouse et al. (2011)	42 practice educators.
	Mixed methods, using questionnaires, interviews, and group discussions.

Practice educators support students to manage both the practical and the emotional demands of placements. Gibson (2012), through an auto-ethnographic exploration of his own practice, highlighted how narrative approaches can effectively support struggling students. Though the research is limited by exploring just one case, it highlights how using narrative techniques to gently challenge master narratives—such as an inability to cope, feeling inadequate, or 'failing' on placement—can help to build students' confidence and lead to more positive outcomes from placement (Gibson, 2012).

Despite the recent increase in fast-track qualifying schemes in England, relatively little research has focused on the experiences of fast-track students on placement. Apeah-Kubi (2021) explored the views of trainee practice educators supporting students on fast-track programs and found concerns from practice educators about the rushed pace of the programs impacting on how prepared students were for

practice. Though students generally presented as well-prepared, Apeah-Kubi (2021) argues that the pace and intensity of fast-track schemes needs to be balanced with providing students with time and support to critically reflect on and embed their learning.

Skills development

Practice educators facilitate the development of students' skills; this involves identifying the skills they need and providing opportunities to develop them (Bates, 2018; Stone, 2016), as well enhancing specific skills through more direct educative methods (Lister & Crisp, 2007; Rawles, 2021).

Some of the baseline skills identified by practice educators as being needed by social work students include the ability to communicate effectively with service users, colleagues, and other professionals, and for students to understand both what they are doing and why they are doing it (Stone, 2016). Practice educators also felt personal characteristics, such as motivation to learn, were important for social work students, and they recognized their own role in providing a reflective space to embed learning (Stone, 2016). Bates (2018) similarly highlighted the importance of practice educators in contributing to students' learning. Practice educators need to be person-centered in their approach and provide direct learning to students by using tools in supervision, as well as ensuring students have good quality learning opportunities on placement (Bates, 2018). Bates (2018) noted that offering such learning opportunities presents challenges when there are insufficient quality placements or where practice educators are off-site and have less influence over the opportunities offered to students.

The capacity for practice educators to facilitate learning is highlighted in other studies. Rawles (2021) argues that practice educators can facilitate improved confidence and skill in professional judgment by ensuring students have opportunities to take responsibility and accountability for making recommendations and providing space to reflect on how they have made their recommendations and the learning they have taken. Meanwhile, Lister and Crisp (2007) explored the use of critical incident analysis in supervision and found that it provided a useful structure for reflection and analysis and supported students to develop confidence in their capacity to relate theory to practice. In these instances, the ability of practice educators to directly enhance skill development is evident.

Working with diversity and difference

The social work workforce is diverse, with a significant proportion of social workers coming from minoritised backgrounds (Social Work England, 2022). Thomas et al. (2010) found that students from global majority backgrounds reported experiences of discrimination, and practice educators were mindful of challenges in successfully supporting students who had experienced or were at risk of discriminatory behavior. Practice educators highlighted the need for organizations and teams to create open and inclusive working environments to support students to integrate, and Thomas et al. (2010) recommend that practice educators and students have early and open conversations about issues of identity and how they might impact students. Despite the need to be aware of issues of discrimination, Collins et al. (2000) found that racism and anti-racism

were not given sufficient attention by students or practice educators in their placement paperwork. Although this research is dated, a lack of openness about diversity and identity was also a theme in Thomas et al. (2010) research, which may suggest insufficient progress has been made in addressing issues of difference and discrimination for social work students.

Within social work, men also represent a minority, accounting for only 17.3% of the workforce (Social Work England, 2022) and male social work students are more likely to fail practice placements than female counterparts (Furness, 2012). Practice educators reported that male students struggled to be open about anxieties or lack of knowledge (Furness, 2012). Furthermore, male social work students were reported to adopt patriarchal attitudes in their relationships with female practice educators that inhibited their capacity to admit weakness (Furness, 2012). This suggests that social work students and practice educators need to be mindful of inherited gender norms and be open to reflecting on and challenging unhelpful gender stereotypes.

Relationships and emotional labor

In supporting student placements, practice educators build and maintain a web of relationships, which include the student, university tutors, on-site supervisors, and colleagues in the placement setting. Relationships involve emotional investment and can entail emotional labor on the part of practice educators, particularly when working with failing students.

Relationships

Much research has focused on the relationship between practice educators and students, with the importance of a positive working relationship being emphasized (Bailey McHale et al., 2019, Lefevre, 2005, Roulston et al., 2022). The research highlights that good communication, clear feedback, and mutual respect are central to successful practice educator–student relationships (Bailey McHale et al., 2019; Lefevre, 2005). Empathy and emotional warmth are also valued aspects of the practice educator relationship (Lefevre, 2005), though Roulston et al. (2022) found that overly close relationships could be as detrimental to the success of a placement as more distant relationships. This suggests a balancing act for practice educators in building meaningful and emotionally supportive relationships while maintaining boundaries and remaining professional.

Other relationships are also important for the success of students' practice placements. Mathews et al. (2009) found that students benefited from greater learning opportunities when they fostered positive relationships with other team members, while relationships with university tutors were valuable too, particularly in times of crisis. Students also reported that personal relationships with family and friends offered valuable support— for example, emotional support and practice support with things life proofreading of work—and relationships with service users provided scope for feedback and professional development (Mathews et al., 2009). There may therefore be a role for practice educators in encouraging students to identify and nurture relationships that can support their placement experience.

Practice educators also navigate other relationships within their role. Brodie and Coyle (2015) found that practice educators valued positive relationships with course providers but felt there was a need for better communication in terms of expectations and preparation. Meanwhile, Henderson (2010) found that positive relationships between off-site practice educators and on-site supervisors were crucial to the success of placements. Both parties emphasized the importance of communication and cooperation, sharing power, and recognizing and valuing the contribution of the on-site supervisor. Participants suggested pairing up on-site supervisors and off-site practice educators to promote familiarity and more harmonious working relationships (Henderson, 2010).

Emotional labour

The notion of emotional labor comes from the work of Hochschild (1983) and relates to the performance of professional identity in the face of emotionally challenging situations. Social workers often mask or suppress their usual emotional responses when faced with frightening or distressing situations so that they can perform their professional role, and it is this performance that entails emotional labor (Winter et al., 2019). Within the literature, there was evidence that practice educators experience emotional labor when working with failing students (Basnett & Sheffield, 2010; Finch, 2017; Finch & Taylor, 2013).

Practice educators often experience intense feelings of anger, guilt, and self-blame when working with students who are failing placement (Finch & Taylor, 2013). When practice educators feel unsupported (Finch & Taylor, 2013), or isolated and stressed (Furness, 2012), this anger can be directed toward course providers who ultimately make the decision over whether a student passes or fails placement. Elsewhere, practice educators reported feeling guilty for not failing students who they felt should have failed, often through a reluctance to go through the difficult process of failing them (Finch & Taylor, 2013). Practice educators may experience feelings of personal failure, internalizing the student's failure as their own, and this can impede their decision-making (Finch et al., 2014), making it hard for practice educators to fail a student (Finch, 2017). Feeling overwhelmed emotionally, as many practice educators reported (Finch & Taylor, 2013), inhibits clear thinking and so practice educators need opportunities to express and process the complex feelings associated with working with students at risk of failing.

Positively, some research highlighted factors that could mitigate the emotional demands of failing a student. Basnett and Sheffield (2010) found that practice educators who saw themselves as 'gatekeepers' of the profession found it easier to justify decisions to fail students. This strong sense of professional identity and responsibility negated feelings of guilt (Basnett & Sheffield, 2010). Furthermore, colleagues can provide valuable emotional support to practice educators, helping them to express and overcome feelings of self-blame (Basnett & Sheffield, 2010). Safe spaces to talk about emotions help social workers manage the experience of emotional labor (Winter et al., 2019), and the literature suggests that practice educators similarly need spaces for emotional processing.

The practice education system

Much of the research on the experiences of practice educators explores challenges they experience in navigating the practice education system. These challenges vary by levels of experience and whether practice educators are independent or employed within statutory organizations. Support for practice educators is reported as being piecemeal, generally provided by the placement organization or the student's course provider.

Challenges

An absence of workload relief was identified as one of the biggest challenges facing practice educators (Burton, 2020; Domakin, 2014, 2015; Haworth, 2019; Waterhouse et al., 2011). Practice educators reported feeling that the importance of the role is under-recognized, with a lack of investment in quality training and limited resources for the practice educator workforce (Domakin, 2014; Haworth, 2019). Remuneration for the role similarly reinforces the notion that practice educators are undervalued, with Waterhouse et al. (2011) and Domakin (2015) finding significant inconsistency in pay for practice educators. This was a particularly pressing issue for independent practice educators, for whom practice education is a key source of income (Waterhouse et al., 2011). This issue is likely to have been further exacerbated by fees for practice educators remaining unchanged for a decade (Department of Health & Social Care, 2024). Practice educators further reported that there were few external motivators to train or remain as practice educators, with no real defined career path or organizational incentives on offer (Haworth, 2019).

Another challenge experienced by practice educators is in working relationships with course providers. Practice educators in some studies reported feeling disconnected from students' learning with their course provider and feeling there was a lack of cohesion between placement and classroom learning (Domakin, 2014; Torry et al., 2005). This led to some practice educators feeling marginalized in their role (Domakin, 2015), an issue exacerbated when working with students at risk of failing (Burton, 2020; Domakin, 2015; Waterhouse et al., 2011). Better partnership working, and closer integration of practice and classroom learning, can help to overcome this sense of disconnection (Domakin, 2014, 2015; Lane, 2023). Frustrations with course providers also extended to complicated and inconsistent paperwork requirements (Burton, 2020; Jasper & Field, 2016), particularly where practice educators work with several course providers who all use different paperwork (Haanwinckel et al., 2018; Waterhouse et al., 2011).

Support

Practice educators also highlighted areas of useful support in their roles. For example, Plenty et al. (2016) found that practice educators valued resources for supervision and training workshops offered by their local practice education network. Where there are close working relationships between course providers, employers, and practice educators, this enables the provision of good quality training and support for practice educators that not only helps them to develop the skills they need but also enables them to view practice education as a valuable career pathway that can lead to other professional opportunities

(Keen et al., 2010). This suggests that meaningful partnership working between stake-holders can create a more supportive environment for practice educators.

The wider context of practice education

Much like social work more widely, practice education has been impacted by a range of regulatory and professional changes over the past 25 years. Practice educators are also uniquely exposed to competing conceptions of what social work is, and this adds a layer of complexity to the role.

The changing landscape of practice education

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, social work education has seen the introduction of degree-level qualification, multiple changes of the professional regulator, the introduction of fast-track and degree apprenticeship qualifying routes, changes to frameworks for assessing placements, and has had to navigate a sustained period of austerity, alongside a global pandemic in 2020.

The introduction of degree-level social work training in 2003 first instituted the requirement for 200 days of practice learning (Doel et al., 2007; Furness & Gilligan, 2004). Furness and Gilligan (2004) identified that the new social work degree raised concerns in relation to the sufficiency of placements and support for students, the usefulness of competency frameworks in assessing social work students and ensuring off-site practice educators felt connected to placement sites. Though the research is dated, many issues identified by the study—such as work-load pressure and lack of workload relief—resonate with more recent research on practice education (Domakin, 2015; Haworth, 2019). Doel et al. (2007) similarly argue that, although the qualifying landscape may change, conditions within the social work workforce remain largely unchanged, and challenges of recruitment, retention, and high workload are contemporary issues for the profession (Social Work England, 2023).

The implementation of the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) as a primary framework for assessing practice learning also significantly impacted practice educators (Jasper & Field, 2016; Plenty & Gower, 2013). Plenty and Gower (2013) found that practice educators viewed the PCF as a useful framework for assessment, and practice educators valued being supported with implementing the PCF in their assessments of student learning. Jasper and Field (2016) similarly found that practice educators liked the holistic nature of the PCF and the scope for creativity it allowed; they also found that the PCF's inclusion of levels that cover the entire social work career—from pre-qualifying through to senior leadership—helped practice educators to foster a sense of professional identity in students. Though they mainly viewed the PCF positively, practice educators did note that its implementation as an assessment tool had led to increasing paperwork, impacting on workload (Jasper & Field, 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on practice education and the provision of practice placements (Beesley & Taplin, 2022). Practice educators reported a degree of ambivalence about the impact of the pandemic; on the one hand, they experienced a sense of loss in relation to their own relationships and vicarious loss for

the missed or reduced opportunities for their students (Beesley & Taplin, 2022). However, they also felt that technology compensated for this, mitigating some of the effects of the move to remote working and opening-up new possibilities for practice learning and assessment. Remote working led to challenges in the placement team 'adopting' the student; however, this could be counter-balanced by regular check-ins between practice educators and students, as well as involvement from course providers (Beesley & Taplin, 2022).

Competing conceptions of social work

Practice educators work at the intersection of competing conceptions of social work, in particular the tension between social work as a theory-driven, value-based profession and as a task-focused, bureaucratic activity (Higgins, 2014; Lane, 2023). Higgins (2014) and Higgins et al. (2016) found fundamental tensions between social work as taught by course providers and social work as practiced in the field (Higgins, 2014; Higgins et al., 2016). Higgins (2014) found that practice educators struggled to make connections between theory and practice, and placement-based practice educators aligned with social work as a more practical-bureaucratic discipline and experience friction with the more idealistic social work taught by course providers (Higgins, 2014).

Higgins et al. (2016) similarly found that practice educators did not always value the teaching offered by course providers, instead placing more emphasis on practical skills, such as report-writing and diary management. Higgins et al. (2016) describe this tension as being between aspirational social work—a theory- and value-based profession concerned with relationships and social justice—and statutory social work, which narrowly focuses on completion of statutory tasks, leaving little space for theory, relationship-building, creative approaches, and critical reflection (Higgins et al., 2016). Higgins et al. (2016) found that practice educators were pessimistic about meaningful change and bringing about greater alignment between the theory and practice of social work.

These findings resonate with Lane's (2023) research, which found that course and placement providers—though reporting positive working relationships—lacked a shared vision of what constitutes good social work practice. Lane (2023) identified that the need for supportive, developmental supervision for students often clashed with organizational contexts where blame culture was pervasive, limiting the ability to learn from mistakes and requiring students and practice educators to exhibit emotional resilience to cope with the realities of practice (Lane, 2023). Like Higgins et al. (2016), participants felt that practical skills such as report-writing and assessment were not covered sufficiently by course providers (Lane, 2023). The practice landscape is increasingly complex and requires students to make sense of practice through using theory, and better integration of course-based learning and practice is one way to encourage this (Lane, 2023).

Discussion

Practice education is a complex activity; practice educators manage a range of relationships which take place within a wider system where they face many challenges, including a lack of support, high workloads, and limited protected time for the role. Practice learning and assessment is also situated within a wider professional

context that is similarly complex and ever-changing. Practice educators work at the interface of theory and practice, placement organizations and course providers, and aspirational and statutory conceptions of social work (Higgins et al., 2016). These tensions in preparing students for practice are acknowledged in other national contexts (Beddoe et al., 2016). Despite this, practice educators express positivity about their role and are motivated to support students and give back to the profession (Develin & Mathews, 2012).

The evidence-base for practice education in England is somewhat limited; many of the studies included in this review were small-scale and exploratory, with a significant proportion drawing on the researchers' own networks to recruit participants from a localized population. Although individually some of the studies lack rigor, the collective findings highlight themes that are supported by multiple studies undertaken across different parts of the country at different points in time.

There are clear gaps in the existing research; for example, there is no national picture of the number and demographics of practice educators. Only three studies (Beesley & Taplin, 2022; Doel et al., 2007; Furness & Gilligan, 2004) involved 50 or more participants, with several studies including fewer than 10 participants. Two studies (Beesley & Taplin, 2022; Furness & Gilligan, 2004) were based on conference workshops with approximately 70 participants which were not recorded or transcribed, and so the data collection and analysis lacked rigor. The absence of large-scale, national studies makes it challenging to get a high-level overview of practice education in England.

Much of the literature on the experiences of practice educators focused on working with students at risk of failing; findings on the emotional experience of practice education may therefore be biased toward the negative. Though positive motivations for becoming practice educators are discussed (Develin & Mathews, 2012), less is known about the emotional experience of successfully supporting students on placement. Only Thomas et al. (2010) explicitly explored the needs of students from global majority backgrounds, with the experiences of practice educators from global majority backgrounds being largely absent within the literature; the same is true of practice educators with disabilities or who are neurodiverse. There is also a paucity of research on the role of the practice educator in supporting students who have diverse and intersecting needs.

It is also notable that the literature focuses on the skills students need to develop on their practice placements (Bates, 2018; Stone, 2016) but not on the knowledge, skills, and values that practice educators need to be successful in their role. Identifying the core qualities and skills needed by practice educators would help to inform ongoing training opportunities for practice educators. Only one study examined the experiences of practice educators on fast-track routes (Apeah-Kubi, 2021); as routes into social work diversify, more research is needed to explore the challenges this may pose for practice learning and assessment, especially since divergence in processes and paperwork from course providers is a source of frustration for practice educators (Burton, 2020; Haanwinckel et al., 2018; Jasper & Field, 2016; Waterhouse et al., 2011). Such research could help to ensure that support for practice educators is tailored to enable them to meet the particular needs of the cohort of students they are working with.

Although some studies have observed or recorded supervision sessions with qualified social workers (Gregory, 2024), there is a lack of research examining what happens in supervision between practice educators and social work students. Jasper's (2021) doctoral research has attempted to address this gap, however since the scoping review was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles, this was not included in the study. Although similar scoping reviews (Sewell, 2018) have also only included peer-reviewed articles, this is a potential limitation.

Conclusion

This review highlights that practice educators undertake a challenging and vital role; practice learning is central pedagogically to social work education (Earls Larrison & Korr, 2013; McGuire & Lay, 2020), with practice educators ensuring that individuals entering the profession have the skills needed to practice (Basnett & Sheffield, 2010; Bates, 2018; Stone, 2016). Despite the important role they play, a key theme in the literature is the lack of support and recognition afforded to practice educators by placement organizations and course providers alike (Burton, 2020; Domakin, 2014; Haworth, 2019; Waterhouse et al., 2011). This is reflected in poor remuneration, lack of protected time and workload, under-valuing of their contributions to student assessment, and limited investment in training and development opportunities.

In many ways, these concerns echo more general worries about supervision practice (Beddoe et al., 2016). The importance of skilled individuals providing reflective, developmental supervision at pre- and post-qualifying levels is an area of broad international consensus (Beddoe et al., 2016), but this provision is overly dependent on the commitment and capability of individuals, often working in structures that do not fully support them. The existing literature reflects the lack of attention practice educators report experiencing, with limited research funding being allocated to better understand the experiences and needs of practice educators. Working toward addressing the research gaps highlighted by this review would provide a positive step toward affording practice educators the recognition and support that their role deserves.

The scoping review was part of a research project funded by Social Work England. It was commissioned by Social Work England to be an independent piece of research. The findings and recommendations do not necessarily reflect the views or position of the organisation.

Disclosure statement

Funding

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