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Social work students' perceptions of their readiness for practice and to practise:

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how social work students perceive they become ready for the workplace during their three-year undergraduate course at two Higher Education Institutions sites in England. The work provides a contribution in that to date little is known from the perspective of students themselves, about how they perceive they become ready for the workplace.

This study used an integrated mixed methods methodology. Data was gathered from a combination of pre- and post- test questionnaires (N=74 participants) and eight semi-structured interviews including the use of pictorial images and drawings.

Five themes were generated from the semi-structured interviews are: (i) becoming ready and resilient; (ii) feeling shut out; (iii) navigating my placement; (iv) trying to fit things together and (v) having what it takes. Participants described their becoming ready for practice as a developmental journey in which they become more resilient, confident and reflective. The findings suggest satisfaction with the social work course although for some they perceived themselves less prepared for most statutory social work positions.

The findings from this study can be used to inform and enhance a creative curriculum to support student confidence and competence by facilitating a supported learning environment offered by practice educators prior to graduation.

Key words: Social work education, readiness for practice, practice learning, student perspective, transition

Introduction

Social work education within England faces challenges in addressing a crisis in confidence in social work practice and how the preparation of social workers is caught within an environment that is turbulent, and is required to respond to complex, and at times, conflicting policy and professional directives. There seems to be an assumption that there is a perceived 'problem' with social work practice, and therefore a natural extension of that 'problem' to the way in which social workers are trained and educated, thus raising questions regarding whether they are fit for the workplace (Nairey, 2012; Croisdale-Appleby, 2013; Carpenter et al., 2011). This study considers this 'problem' through the perspective of how students consider they become ready for practice and to practise. It can be argued that these problems emerge through a social work environment that is constantly changing, turbulent and subject to at times competing policy drivers.

A note about the terminology used within this study is necessary. Various terms are used to describe the readiness for practice element of social work education. Preston-Shoot (2004) argued for a separation between competence for practice (prior to qualified practice) and competence to practise (post-qualification). For clarification, this paper concerns itself with the concept of 'readiness for practice' but other authors also use the term 'readiness to practise' and preparedness for practice interchangeably.

The findings reported in this paper address a qualitative component of research conducted during the third phase of a three-phase mixed methods study. The findings reported here are based upon eight semi-structured interviews supported by creative methods conducted with undergraduate social work students.

Literature

In order to understand the perceptions and experiences of social work students, it is important to understand who and what social work students are within the changing social work education landscape. The section below considers the national picture in which social work students are currently 'fit to practise' in England as a response to the previous stated problem of perceived difficulties of students being prepared for the workplace.

Social work education under the spotlight

Social work requires professionals with a particular mix of skills and abilities (Social Work Reform Board, 2010) and the process by which social work education produces such professionals begins with the education of social work students. The effectiveness of social work education in preparing social work students for practice has been the subject of political attention in recent years (Lishman, 2011; Halton & Powell, 2013; Maxwell et al., 2016 & 2010) and it can be argued that the directions emerging from this attention have lacked congruence and coherence. The nature of social work education is seen as both part of, and a solution, to the problem. The mandatory introduction of the 30 days of skills training across all social work

programmes from 2013 provided a platform for practice educators, placement tutors and students to discuss readiness for practice and eventually to practise and to work closely with others to improve services.

Welbourne (2010), discussing social work in the UK, considers how politicisation makes social work a product of what she terms as an unstable institutional context, giving rise to a continuous re-adjustment in practice and renegotiation of its position. The literature review conducted by Moriarty et al. (2014) into the roles and issues within the social work profession in England, emphasises how roles and responsibilities are greatly influenced by the regimes in which they are located as well as the wider community. It also points to how social work qualifying education is, as a corollary, a conflicted policy area,

This complex and turbulent political landscape forms a backdrop against which social work students strive to become ready for practice and to practise. It can be argued, gives rise to perceptions of a 'problem' within social work education. For Munro (2011, para 8.18) it is clear that "*not all newly-qualified social workers are emerging from degree courses with the necessary knowledge, skills and expertise.*" 'Changing Lives' (2006, Part 10: para 8) identifies that "*making the transition from student to practitioner and having to make complex and challenging decisions on your own, is never easy. Employers have a vital role in helping people to make that transition.*"

Parker (2010) noted that the way in which social work students are prepared for placement, within a rapidly changing and demanding work environment are uppermost in the minds of politicians and policy makers, social work managers and educators. A growing body of research argues for the need to develop a new social work pedagogy that is more firmly grounded on empirical evidence of 'what works' (Wilson et al., 2010; Fook et al., 2000; Trevithick et al., 2004; Richards et al., 2005; Orme et al., 2009). It can be argued that there remains limited knowledge and understanding of how social work students perceive their readiness for practice and to practise, or how they acquire, develop and apply professional social work knowledge and expertise.

As outlined by Frost et al. (2005 & 2008) the practice of social work requires the development of critical, analytical and reasoning skills within degree level education. Subjects taught routinely on degree courses for social work include sociology, psychology, law and social policy. However, teaching on the generic and specific social work skills required in day to day practice, work with service user groups, personal and professional development, as well as philosophical and ethical stances and the amount of time spent engaging in the field of practice varies greatly across countries.

The Professional Capabilities Framework or PCF (TCSW, 2012), providing a structural progression route for all social work students and post qualifying social workers. There is also an absence of sound evidence explaining why the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) is seen by employers as redundant. Furthermore, there is little evidence to date that the partial solution of the 30

mandatory social work skills days in the social work degree actually assist with 'readiness to practise'. By the end of the first placement students should demonstrate effective use of knowledge, skills and commitment to core values in social work within a given setting. They should be working with supervision, and support, meeting a holistic assessment by the practice educator and meeting the nine domains of the capabilities framework. But what is meant by being capable or competent to practise?

Until 2013, the supremacy of technical-rationalist competency models has been seen in the development of National Occupational Standards (NOS) for a range of professions as well as competency requirements to be met when training. The argument against competency models is that they reduce complex professional skills, knowledge, decision-making, tasks and processes into simplistic units of distinct activity and encourage a tick-box approach to the task of assessment (Eraut, 1994; Owens, 1995; O'Hagan, 1996; Parrott, 1999; Finch, 2010). For some authors this raises a concern that such models are also far removed from concepts such as anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice (Jayaratne et al., 1992; Kemshall, 1993; Conn, 1993; Brummer, 1998; Phillips, 1998; Burgess et al., 1998b).

Carpenter et al. (2013) found support for an evolutionary model of professional development where three cohorts of NQSWs within a Children and Families team in England (N=2019) self-reported that confidence increased over the first year as expertise developed. This was shown through the use of self-efficacy measures to evaluate the development of confidence and competence as well as professional development. It may be helpful to note that my operational understanding of the term self-efficacy was drawn largely from literature on social cognitive theory by Bandura (1997). Carpenter et al. (2013) cite Holden et al. (2002, p.116) who maintained that "*Self-efficacy is more than a self-perception of competency. It is an individual's assessment of his or her confidence in their ability to execute specific skills in a particular set of circumstances.*"

Readiness for practice and to practise

Despite the passage of time, Marsh and Triseliotis's study (1996) remains relevant. It focused on newly qualified practitioners and first line managers' views about newly qualified social workers' gaps in knowledge. One of the concerns identified in this study was the identified gaps relating to students' understanding of the realities of practice in court work and child protection. This was the first major study exploring the effectiveness of social work education and the readiness or preparedness of newly qualified social workers (and probation officers) to practise in the UK. The main findings of this study suggested that the majority of newly qualified social workers (85%) felt 'quite well' or 'very well' prepared to practise.

Pithouse and Scourfield's mixed methods study (2002) used a postal survey of recently qualified social workers (N=115) who had completed their Diploma in Social Work in Wales, alongside a postal survey administered to workplace supervisors and their employers followed up by 50 telephone interviews with supervisors and senior managers. The findings reveal that 90% of the supervisors and senior managers

believed that the newly qualified staff were at least adequately trained in relation to the employer's needs. Interestingly, those ex-students working in the voluntary sector felt better prepared to practise than participants in the statutory sector. A significant point emerging from their study (2002) was that further investigation was needed to explore definitions of what 'preparedness' might mean for students.

Lyons and Manion's comprehensive review (2004) of a series of social work employment surveys carried out in England from 1998-2003 focused on newly qualified social workers' perceptions of their experiences of professional employment. From the 'snap shots' Lyons and Manion (2004) collated during the initial inquiry, and building on the work undertaken by Marsh and Triseliotis (1996), impetus was given for subsequent inquiry to include questions about the 'fit' between social work practice and education (Grant et al., 2014). One of the main findings to emerge from Grant et al. (2014) includes evidence of widespread satisfaction with social work education. Interestingly, the least satisfactory core competency (68%) was 'intervene and provide' which concurred with the earlier findings of Pithouse and Scourfield (2002). A limitation of Grant et al.'s study (2014) was lack of qualitative elements and the over reliance on self-selection, with no follow up interviews to explore key themes.

A common theme from the above studies following newly qualified students into the working environment is the description of a hard clash with reality, described as a 'baptism of fire' (Bates et al., 2010, p.152). It is suggested in two of the studies that it is important for social work students to gain a realistic understanding of their future work and obtain support from experienced colleagues and from managers during the post qualifying period (Bates et al., 2010; Moriarty et al., 2010). However, rather than preparing social work students to 'hit the ground running', Moriarty et al. (2014) argued that social work education should be seen as a developmental process, not as the end product.

Student perceptions and experiences of preparedness for practice learning settings

In Parker's (2006) study it became clear that perceptions of competence during practice learning of social work students at both post graduate and undergraduate levels increased between pre-test and post-test across the six sub-scales identified within the study. The results of this study indicated a significant change in perceived self-efficacy throughout the placement opportunity. It is evident from the study that practice learning plays an important role in students' perceptions of their development into professional and competent professionals. Limitations of this study included the small sample size and the fact the study focused on one practice area.

Gelman (2004) suggests there is a lack of research into the fears and anxieties of students as they prepare for their first learning experience, suggesting that greater knowledge in this area would enable practice educators to meet gaps that may exist in preparing students for the workplace. Gelman further concludes that if students had received some teaching prior to practice on managing their emotions at the start of the placement experience, they may be significantly less anxious.

The aim of the comparative inquiry conducted by Frost et al. (2013) was to present the views of undergraduate social work students, through a predominately phenomenological approach, from three different welfare regimes (Italy, Sweden and England) with the focus on analysing in what way at the end of their training they feel ready to practise. Only five participants were interviewed from each of the three different universities in which the researchers were teaching (N=15). A key finding from the Frost et al's study was that students expressed a great deal of ambivalence about the role of theory in their education. Interestingly, Italian students seemed much more positive about the personal growth and development they experienced during the course than their counterparts.

In addition, Wilson (2013) suggests that social work programmes should not overly depend on practice learning to prepare students to address the challenges presented by a changing and complex working environment. They emphasise the need for closer collaboration between employing partners and educators to ensure the already crowded curriculum keeps up to date with the changing learning needs of practitioners.

Across disciplinary groups, transition is reported as a stressful time for newly qualified practitioners (Ross and Clifford, 2002). Toal-Sullivan (2006) and Johansson & Nordstrom (2008), report students experiencing initial feelings of uncertainty and strangeness and even if they felt familiar with the work place, they found their new role challenging. For occupational therapists and junior doctors it was anxiety caused by the uncertainty or lack of clarity about their role that made the transition stressful (Toal-Sullivan, 2006; Brennan et al., 2010). O'Shea & Kelly (2007) found that being 'new' caused psychological stress for some of their participants who felt 'scared, nervous or daunted'. The junior doctors participating in Brennan et al's (2010) study expressed their feelings through the stronger term of 'terrifying'. Within the above-mentioned studies, these feelings lasted only a week or so for most, slightly longer for some but decreasing as they became more familiar with the working environment.

Method

This study employed an integrated mixed methods methodology (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009) that included a mixed methods research synthesis of literature (phase one). Phase two incorporates a pre-and post-survey with participants (N=74) from two Higher Educational Institutions followed through their three years enrolled in a BA in Social Work (BASW) undergraduate degree between 2013-2016 in England, exploring their readiness for practice including the mandatory social work skills days. Phase three included eight semi-structured interviews which explored the storied experiences of the emotional and affective responses of social work students prior to, and following, placement experiences in a highly regulated professional social care context. Pictorial drawings and card images produced by participants were used as triggers during the semi-structured interviews.

The pragmatist philosophical assumption (Cherryholmes, 1992; Crotty, 2012) fits well with the intention of this research to understand both the complex problem of

readying social work students for the workplace on graduation, and understanding how students perceive they become fit for practice and to practise, illuminating 'what works' in assisting their development.

Pre-registration social work students from the two participating universities were invited to participate in the main study following the same process for both sites. It was envisaged that enough participants could be recruited from this large pool of students from both sites (site one: N=87 and site two: N=50 - total N=137). 74 participants completed the pre-and post-test survey and eight participants were involved with the semi-structured interviews. Demographic data about participants is reported in a manner aimed to ensure anonymity.

In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to foster exploration, openness and expansiveness through participation in 'talk' (Smith et al., 2008). Semi-structured interviewing was felt appropriate as the interview guide could support the interview to unfold rather than dictate it. This was important for this study as views of participants regarding their readiness for practice and the usefulness of the skills days is an understudied area (Rogers, 2017) and furthermore a 'social production of knowledge' through an interview process, as proposed by Brinkmann and Kvale (2005), was felt to be relevant.

Participants in the quantitative strand (phase three) were asked to indicate on the questionnaire that they were willing to take part in the interview, thus a sample of convenience was achieved. Eight participants volunteered across the two sites. Four participants at each site were interviewed. Prior to each interview, the purpose was explained to participants and a request made to audio record the interview for the purposes of transcription. Each interview lasted between 30-60 minutes.

The participants were invited to engage in a creative activity of pictorial drawing and use of cards at the beginning of the interview. In addition, participants were advised that the pictorial work they had been involved in at the beginning of the interview would act as a prompt and encourage them to expand on their accounts. Plowright (2011) suggests these strategies of using creative processes (drawing and picture cards) to interrogate experience may enable the participant to better reflect on their situation and address perceived inadequacies in capturing the rich nature of the processes involved through interview alone. It may also offer the potential for stories told by a range of participants to enhance their own understanding and critical thinking, which may also lead to transformative practice.

The approach taken to the analysis of the qualitative data was thematic analysis and supported by the work of Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is claimed to be compatible with both essentialist and constructionist paradigms (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Data from the three strands were integrated at the point of theoretical interpretation following the separate analyses undertaken within the parameters of respective paradigms for this study. A triangulation protocol, as outlined by O'Cathain, Murphy and Nicholl (2010), was used to generate a coherent, explanatory framework by highlighting the multi-faceted nature of the factors involved in a social

work student becoming ready for practice and to practise and be further discussed in a separate paper.

Ethics

Proposals for the pilot and main studies were approved by the Research Ethics Committees of both participating universities. Student participation in the study was voluntary and all prospective participants were given an information sheet prior to the study. All were given time to ask questions and make an informed decision as to whether they wished to participate. Those agreeing to participate completed a consent form. This was then repeated at the interview stage. A variety of techniques to increase the trustworthiness, credibility and authenticity of qualitative data were employed. These were: audit trails, reflexivity, thick and rich description, peer debriefing and member checking. All questionnaires and interview transcripts were anonymised, and all materials used in the study were kept securely according to the Data Protection Act (1998). Student numbers were used on all data collection materials to ensure questionnaires could be collated and matched. All paperwork was held securely for audit purposes.

Participants were asked to provide verbal consent for their drawings to be photocopied. Students were invited to participate in the follow up interviews via the post-test questionnaire. Those who volunteered provided email or telephone details to allow me to contact them. Students participating in the interviews were reminded that they were free to withdraw at any time without having to give a reason, and without detriment. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with participating students being offered a copy of the recording and transcript if they wished. As above, all transcribed data was anonymised. To protect their confidentiality, the participants were allocated a pseudonym as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1 Participant pseudonym, study site and placement setting

Site	Placement setting	Pseudonym
1	Children Social Care	Helen
1	Mental Health	Michael
1	Older Adults Social Care	Sarah
1	Children Social Care	Kate
2	Children Social Care	Hayley
2	Mental Health	Salma
2	Older Adults Social Care	Rosie
2	Independent Sector / Mental Health	Lucy

Findings

The thematic analysis of the interview data resulted in the generation of five themes. These are: (i) becoming ready and resilient; (ii) feeling shut out; (iii) navigating my placement; (iv) trying to fit things together and (v) having what it takes. Together these themes provide an interpretation of how students describe the experience of their learning to become ready for the workplace, their readiness for practice and to practise. The participants described their becoming ready for practice as a developmental journey in which they become more resilient, confident and reflective.

Becoming ready and resilient

Becoming ready for the workplace was seen as relying on being or becoming more resilient in the face of challenges. These included challenges in the participants' personal life that made studying difficult and included problems encountered on practice learning placements. The development of resilience was understood to be founded on having certain personal qualities: determination; seeing the bigger picture; having patience; being calm; having positivity; being motivated; being reflective; having confidence; being empathic; being strong, purposeful and adaptive. These attributes were seen as aspects of personal development that were required to strengthen the resilience needed for having what it takes in being ready for practice and eventually to practice. However, the course's role in helping them to personally develop and grow in this way was hard to identify.

Within this study, the participants used the terms self-reflection and reflection consistently throughout the interviews when discussing how their social work course facilitated their growth and development, enabling them to become resilient and manage their emotions. For example, Kate commented

'I thought what a learning journey. I thought I was an insightful person, but this is, this course has enhanced it. I think I have changed a lot on the course, and I know some of the other students too. I have changed the way I think, and I have also grown as an individual.'

Becoming resilient appeared to be based on having or developing certain personal qualities. Participants in the study through their interviews and creative drawings articulated a large range of personal qualities and attributes that they felt helped them to be ready and resilient for practice, these can be found in Table 2.

Table 2 Personal qualities / attributes identified by participants about becoming ready and resilient prior to qualification

Personal quality / attribute	Detail
Determination	<p>"I have worked so hard to be where I am today, giving up is not an option. I have always been resilient and it's too late to turn back now at this stage" (Lucy)</p> <p>"Being a mature student, I don't know if I would make it or not, I was so excited to start the course at the beginning....I have got a young family but I am determined to and I enjoy the course and placement" (Sarah)</p>
Patience	<p>"I have learnt you have to take small learning steps That sometimes, I might take a step back to learn something new but then I can continue on my journey when I've learnt that" (Kate)</p> <p>"...because it's been a long journey and it feels as though I am nearly at the top of the stairs" A picture card identified by participant Hayley – <i>Steps</i></p>
Calmness	<p>"I think you just have to stay calm.... I think to stress about the work is not going to get the work done" (Kate)</p> <p>"Knowing that I have a body of knowledge to support my decision making, even the most difficult ones, give me strength in knowing I am ready for practice" A picture card identified by participant Rosie – <i>Researcher</i></p>
Positivity	<p>"I just think if I don't do this task, it still needs to happen. I have received constructive criticism before, and I know I can complete this task well "(Sarah)</p> <p>"I have learned and developed many skills and I feel positive that I can apply the skills I have gained over the time in order to practice as a social worker" (Rosie)</p>
Motivation	<p>A picture card identified by participant Sarah – <i>Climbing stairs</i> – "if you are not willing to climb the stairs it will be even harder work, I can see the top of the stairs and I know I've got to reach it....to get to the point of being comfortable and confident in what I am doing, it is coming and I know it is..."</p>
Confidence	<p>"I feel more confident in what I am doing as I feel much more competent in my practice... I had to prove to everyone that I am capable in chairing the meeting with other professionals... I did feel the pressure during the meeting, but I did not allow that to influence my work" (Helen)</p>
Purposeful	<p>"The only thing that kept me going was not letting my family and partner down" (Lucy)</p> <p>"It's a bit like reaching out and if you can give something back" (Sarah)</p>
Adaptive	<p>"If something does not work, accept it and adjust your practice and find a different way where you feel comfortable as the work is difficult enough as it is..." (Sarah)</p>

The most frequently mentioned attributes within both groups were confidence, determination, calmness and having a purpose. Empathy was closely linked to professionalism and being a professional alongside other professionals in the presence of service users/carers.

"But I have got to understand the professional side of the role too, the impact on the child, so, that challenged my thinking, I can understand that more, different choices" (Kate)

"...your role is varied and having empathy with the different service user's situation is important in developing trust with them" A pictured card identified by participant (Salma – Different colour pencils and hands)

The participants appeared to see an interconnection with power, diversity and self-identify. These findings would suggest, from these mostly mature participants, that they had some understanding of how not to burn out, and this depended on becoming resilient.

"If you have a difficult case it can knock you back and you can lose your confidence...but putting it into perspective helps why you are there to protect the most vulnerable in society, helps to get me through the day" (Michael)

"Everyone has bad days and it feels like you are in a bubble of your own, but not all days would be like that" A picture card identified by participant (Lucy - Different colour bubbles)

The participants perceived they needed to manage emotions in social work.

"I've got to accept that I am going to be challenge during my practice by others and that they would keep coming back and challenge my decisions, erm, I have to learn to not take that personally and be think skinned, that's the emotional resilience part, isn't it?" (Michael)

Reflecting on how to do this by developing resilience was a key finding as they integrated the professional and personal aspects of self.

"I think that students need a good reflective ability and making us question ourselves, and discuss 'who am I?'...what do I convey to the service use? So, we have that light bulb moment and find out how much you are continuously learning" (Lucy)

"I think it is important to get to know yourself while you're studying, and what a kind of practitioner you are going to be and what your value base as a social worker would be" (Salma)

Feeling shut out

The placement settings the participants described in the drawings and interviews in response to the question: "Tell me about your worst experience on placement" often appeared quite inaccessible. Their responses could relate to something physical, such as being able to find the department and get in through locked doors or no desk space provided to enable them to feel part of the team. It could also relate to inattention to their emotional responses to these, and other factors in the environment, that can be overpowering to the point where they cause anxiety, isolation and self-doubt. What they were describing was a learning environment that was not easily accessible, which they perceived does not have a place for them and where they had to find their place as best they can. Their management of their feelings of anxiety, nervousness, isolation and fear were part of their development of 'becoming a professional' experience.

This learning and development were seen to be promoted by practice placements; however, it was not always straightforward, with students explaining that the organisational culture of some placements left them 'feeling shut out'. Sarah reflected on her final placement:

'It is surprising how organisational culture does strengthen and reinforce your learning but it's also hard to break down the barriers and I think I felt that being a student. My practice educator was lovely, and the team was fabulous, and I think that helped me through the placement as the manager was awful to me. When my practice educator was not available and I wanted some support, she would say I'm not your supervisor and asked me to get support somewhere else. Apparently, a few other students had left because of her and how she treated them.' (Sarah)

Participants described the pain of, as they saw it, being treated badly and left feeling they did not belong. Other participants also described feeling somewhat 'shut out'. Lucy, who had a third sector placement, was very unsatisfied with her final placement and consequently felt she had missed out on something of value. Interestingly, her drawing and images reflected a sense of alienation, almost oppression and well conveyed by her saying *'I feel I look at things differently than my peers during teaching and on placement.'* Lucy's descriptions of difficulty in getting into the placement, alongside what she reported as a problematic setting and the management style resulting in her saying: *'I find it difficult to accept constructive feedback and I become defensive and protective. I feel so confused.'* Lucy conveyed a sense of a hostile and chaotic, voluntary sector placement setting that contrasted significantly with her previous descriptions of a children and family statutory placement.

They described some placements as inaccessible in terms of actually being able to enter the space, or their emotional reactions to being criticised or unsupported as isolating, but also accepted as part of a professional socialisation process that demanded resilience.

Navigating my placement

Placement settings seemed to be the most significant aspect identified by all the participants in their readiness for practice journey. The students appeared to feel they needed to navigate their placement in order to gain the most learning. A considerable amount of discussion during the interviews took place about the relevance, time and duration of this component of social work education and the students' feelings of their readiness for practice depended on how they navigated through placement.

From the interviews, participants' accounts showed variations in their views about how preparatory academic teaching on the programme as a whole supported their ability to navigate their placement, and some described feeling well prepared:

'I've just started to restore and remember everything I need to know such as procedures, theories and models for practice.' (Hayley)

However, other participants reported that they felt less well prepared for placement learning and had concerns about the extent to which their academic learning had prepared them for practice. Typical comments included the following:

'I feel like I might be out of my depth and be asked questions I don't know the answers too.' (Kate)

'I cannot wait to go out on placement, but I am nervous so therefore the feeling of not being ready creeps in.' (Rosie)

'The made-up scenarios provided us with limited learning experiences within the classroom environment.' (Hayley)

'I would have benefitted more from practice realities and direct involvement from more service user and shadowing experiences during teaching.' (Michael)

Academic preparation included recall days to the university whilst attending the two respective placements over the three-year course. The majority of the responses from participants suggested that they did not find the recall days useful and would have benefitted more if they could have stayed on at placement for the day.

Participants also indicated other factors they felt important upon their placement preparation one student mentioned drawing on personal resources: *'My personal life experiences and skills enhanced my preparedness for placement.'* (Kate)

Salma felt meeting someone from the setting prior to the placement was helpful and commented that the *'pre-placement meeting with the practice assessor/educator made everything fit into place'*; and Rosie mentioned *'researching the setting prior to going there helped Pre-reading on service user group and setting helped me to feel more confident about what I know and not.'* (Rosie)

It became clear through the interviews that practice learning was the most appreciated element of the student social workers' education and that they found it very important to be able to navigate the placement. From the interviews, it appeared that this navigation fulfilled different learning needs for different students. For some students it was to understand and learn what social work is, and for some to get the opportunity to see if they could be a social worker or can they do social work. Sarah highlighted this notion of *'becoming'* by commenting *'I am looking forward in seeing what kind of social worker I would be and put what I have learned so far in practice.'* (Sarah)

Becoming a social worker was difficult for some students to navigate as they struggled with what social work involved on placement. One commented

'I found it difficult on placement to prioritise my workload; I could not cope with the volume of work my practice educator allocated to me. I feel frustrated that I was not able to develop my social work skills further in my training.' (Hayley)

Hayley went on to mention time management as one of the areas she requires further support with. Students knowing, they had the support from university tutors became important when things went wrong on placement, with one participant commenting that

'It was good to have my university tutor at meetings as it helped me to feel more relaxed and supported. I found the support from my university tutor essential when I was going through a difficult patch at placement.' (Lucy)

Whilst academic staff input was valued if things became difficult, peer support seemed to be the most featured element in the participants' formal and informal learning. The support from fellow students when navigating placement was highly valued by the participants. The formally organised group supervision, group tutorials and workshops also rated highly amongst the students and they valued the informal

support from colleagues. Surprisingly, the topic of receiving feedback was not raised by the majority of the participants.

Kate commented *'I felt I could fly and be a super-hero social worker when learning with other students being on placement with me.'* (Kate)

Placement learning was seen as a kind of socialisation, that included learning to work with other disciplines and at the same time students developed a professional identity as a social worker. This could be difficult to navigate, but one student seemed to be successful in this respect:

'at a multi-disciplinary meeting I'd challenge appropriately, I remark that one of the comments a nurse practitioner made was oppressive and I supported my professional judgement with evidence from practice' (Sarah). Sarah reported that the nurse went on to commend her on this intervention after the meeting.

It was apparent from the participants' accounts that being able to navigate the placement was seen as vital to being able to acquire practical knowledge and capability. The following comments emphasised some of the problems social work students faced in practice: Michael, reflecting on how his university learning had prepared him for practice learning, commented

'I did not learn anything from the placement. It would have been more useful if we could learn to complete assessments, write a report for court or a social circumstances report. Having templates or the assessments and previous reports would have helped me to prepare for placement better.' (Michael)

Sarah, however, described how her placement enabled her to use what she had learned at university to advance her practice capabilities:

'My theory to practice went off the scale, I can say that and I'm really grateful to my placement practice educator and for the opportunities that she gave me. I thought she would be more with me during the placement, but she wasn't, it was more like – Come on Sarah, go and complete the assessment and the review, come back and we could discuss the work. I felt quite anxious about that and I think it was more lack of self confidence in my own ability.' (Sarah)

The comments of Michael and Sarah, from different perspectives, illustrated how important being able to navigate the placement through having supported opportunities to undertake activities was in becoming ready for practice. It became clear that the type of experience available in placements was seen as vital in becoming a social worker. In this respect, during the interviews, students stressed how important they believed it was to undertake at least one placement within a statutory setting in order to experience fully the processes involved in undertaking statutory tasks. Salma commented

'I am grateful that my first placement was in a children and families statutory team. It was not an easy ride, but I learned a great amount of what I am able to do as a student before qualifying.' (Salma)

Lucy stated *'I don't feel that I am employable to work in a statutory setting as I have no idea what the work would be involving as both my placements were in the third sector. I am nervous as I would not know how to complete an assessment or write a report.'* (Lucy)

This importance of statutory placement was echoed across all the participants' accounts. The student drawings and picture discussion challenged this notion of placement as a unified place or experience. They highlighted how diverse, fluid and highly contested a learning placement was with some participants' privileging practice and practice understanding above theoretical knowledge. The landscape of social work placement turned out to be a much more changeable, interpreted and contested site than I had originally imagined at the start of this research.

Trying to fit things together

Some of the participants struggled with the concept of 'theory' or how they could use theoretical constructs in practice. They described being able to 'fit together' the theoretical components of the course to their practice experience as difficult and varied in their perceptions of how helpful skills days were in assisting them do this. They expressed that understanding theory might be important but knowing how to fit it into their placement experience in a meaningful way appeared problematic for the students. Sarah described difficulties in fitting things together

'I was very excited to come to university but nervous too.... But as I went to lectures and learn what is expected from students (PCF) and the values, oppression and personal practices all the theories erm, but what I couldn't get my head around was how does that all fit in the real world.... It is not something like butter that you spread on bread. I think I got myself in knots about that and I wished that I'd done more reading in the first year before I went on placement one.' She continued *'I didn't understand what is meant with critical reflection. My practice educator used critical tools during supervision to help me reflect on my practice. I didn't understand and that really frightened me that I was not able to link or see the theory.'* (Sarah)

Asking participants to reflect on the social work skills days brought varied responses regarding how well they enabled the students to make these anticipated links between theory and practice. Helen commented

'I know that some of the skills days were long and they needed some tweaking, but in all honesty they are a good thing definitely, and I think you have to go through the stages where you think, what is going on, why are we learning this, and then you realise once you start placement that everything is coming together and for me, after placement that's when it struck home to me, what everything's starting to mean.' (Helen)

For Michael

'learning about empathy during the skills days was very important as I always knew about being empathic but not as deep as what it's been learnt at university, and how important good listening skills are for a social worker. I do have a map; I do refer

back to the PCF domains as they proved guidance if I am ready or not for practice.' (Michael)

These two participants saw value in their skills days. However, there was still a struggle sometimes in how students conceptualised 'theory' and 'practice' and as Watson et al. (2002) stated, they should be intertwined and mutually constitutive. From the interviews it became clear the students were talking about theories in different ways. The issue of "what can you do with the theory?" came from the majority of the students. All the participants had uncertainties what theory is, and/or what to do with it, and some ambivalence about theory in social work education was demonstrated.

For some students, theories were seen less clearly *'I don't think that theory means a lot as it gives me some concepts, but I don't find it useful in practice and it's confusing.'* (Michael)

Looking more closely at how the students discussed what theory underpins practice, many of the responses of the students refer to skills and/or interventions that guide their work with service users/carers. There was little difference in what was taught, and how it was perceived by the students across both sites. Some continued not to be able see connections and how this learning would help them be ready for the workplace, but others described lightbulb moments of working in practice and realising what they had learned in university helped their understanding of a practice situation.

These issues were related to students' concerns regarding 'having what it takes'. It should be noted that all interviewees were mature with a great deal of life and social care experience. Some were struggling with challenges to getting through the course due to personal and health related factors. Showing that one has what it takes to meet the standards required was described as stressful, but most described a transition of personal and professional growth and increasing resilience as they gained experience through the course.

Having what it takes

There was some evidence that periods of transition, such as progressing to placement, were times when social work students felt challenged, required support and felt they needed to demonstrate resilience. In particular, participants commented on the experiences of being on placement as a student and feeling pressured to show that one 'had what it takes' to be perceived as a professional.

For some students showing they had what it takes included an element of taking on a professional identity going into placement. There was a desire to cast off their 'lay' identity as they moved into placement and eventually practice. Salma explained the following:

'You go from being a person walking down the street to seeing very distressing and upsetting things being done to vulnerable people on a regular basis, it's something you need to learn to get used to, I guess...' (Salma)

From the interviews it became clear that for some participants the concern about showing a professional face was demonstrated by the way they talked about themselves in the first or third person. For Lucy and Rosie, it was important how they appeared to other people on placement. They were conscious of who was watching them on placement, and felt the pressure of the effort required to meet the standards they were being assessed upon and what was asked of them by other social workers within the team. Lucy assumed this to be to hide her own true emotions, and only presented what she thought they wanted to see. She mentioned on two occasions how closed she was: *'My face was open, but I was closed, I was engaging and interested but never opened up'* (Lucy). For some students, having what it takes was a performance element of embodying the professional. However, Kate's response was different. In her account nothing was mentioned about the stress of 'doing' social work. It was viewed as part of her role on placement and she commented *'Having what it takes is what she is there to do'* (Kate)

The participants' role was constantly changing, as they moved between levels of study, getting ready for their first placement and progressing to their final placement. Some of the concerns raised were how they would be perceived by other professionals. The participants thought about how they came across to other professionals, and how they were judged when they suddenly required dealing with challenging things or topics. Interactions with other professionals were raised as an issue by all the participants. As their confidence grew stronger, they however felt more able to put forward their professional opinion and show they had what it takes.

Some participants identified that they felt thrown in at the deep end during placements but for three participants, being stretched was a positive learning experience. However, most of the participants indicated changes in perceived self-efficacy throughout both placements *'my placement was a discovery of my own strengths and development's needs'* (Helen). Michael reported

'...knowing I am not super-man was something my practice educator highlighted frequently during supervision... but I felt really ready and able to do the work' (Michael)

For Rosie, her time on the course practice learning experiences provided her with opportunities to become more capable and confident in her own abilities. She stated

'my drawing – size of the figures are important as well as body language as it is one of celebration when I have achieved a milestone during the course and on placement' (Rosie)

In a different situation, Lucy still lacked confidence with other professionals and with her own practice, suggesting her own doubts about having what it takes. She discussed her experiences in a voluntary mental health setting where she stood back while other professionals were working with the service users, and she did not quite know when her turn would be. Lucy found her placement difficult and the way she perceived her own practice may have provided a barrier to successful performance, and she questioned if she was ready for social work and if this was the right time for

her being on placement. She identified she had a lack of trust in the practice educators' ability to help her make appropriate choices and felt unable to manage the complex organisational culture. These were key elements in why she was struggling on placement and made her feel she didn't have what it takes to be a good social worker.

'I don't feel I can share my anxieties with my practice educator as she is also the manager and I don't want to be in trouble. The team is going through huge changes and I don't want to add to problems' (Lucy)

For the majority of participants their perceptions of confidence increased mainly in the second year following placement one. Critical reflection and communication skills both written and with others, featured highly amongst the participants as the skill that had developed the most. What this was due to was unknown. Unstated by the students, it could be due to the impact of skills days facilitated by practitioners and service users or the role of placement and the working relationship with the practice educator during placement. Interestingly, it may also be the previous work experiences, life experiences, placement opportunities that have helped them to develop their perceived competence.

Enhancing their ability to perform certain social work tasks successfully was pointed out by the participants as a role for the practice setting. They also pointed to their own responsibility in taking up new opportunities for developing and enhancing their skills and knowledge underpinned by core criteria such as the PCF and KSS. Michael commented

'Knowing that I was being assessed on the 9 domains for social work practice by the PCF, I knew that everything would work out well. It is confusing that we have the knowledge skills statements for social work as well as the PCF. I know I have passed both placements so I should be ready for practice' (Michael)

As social work students learning to be professionals, their issues around their sense of self, student self and professional self was interesting particularly because their emotional experiences and reactions were part of how they constituted and were constituted by their professional self on placement.

Discussion

The findings illuminate the perspective of students and reveal they consider becoming resilient an important factor in being able to 'do' social work and 'being' a social worker depended on having or developing certain attributes. Students' described resilience as being supported by specific attributes and its development challenged and shaped by the placement culture. Being supported to become critically reflective was seen as important in being able to 'fit together' theory and practice. The students' responses reveal the importance of the role of emotion management and development of self as they engage with their development as a social worker in the changing and complex social work environment. The focus is on

having competence for practice at the forefront but recognising the blurred lines between the two when studying social work as a profession with engaging in practice (practicing) being part of the preparation for qualification.

It has been argued that relying solely on the views of students to consider preparedness for practice has its shortcomings. Parker (2006) reminded us that the level of student satisfaction with placement is not necessarily indicative of the placement's effectiveness. For Parker (2006) collecting the views of other stakeholders, such as practitioners and managers who supervise student placements, is important when assessing students' preparedness for practice (although in the literature other terms such as workbase supervisor, practice educator/assessor or field educator are more widespread).

Some evidence emerged that may suggest a relationship between those with a higher degree of previous non-qualified social work/care work experience and higher levels of self-efficacy at the start of their readiness for practice journey. This is consistent with similar findings by Marsh and Triseliotis (1996), Moriarty et al. (2011), and Parker (2006) on the currency of previous social work experiences. Although, by the end of the final stage, it seemed that self-efficacy had levelled out across the cohorts, with little change distinguished between those with previous work experiences and those without.

Some were struggling with challenges to getting through the course due to personal and health related factors. Showing that one has what it takes to meet the standards required was described as stressful, but most described a transition of personal and professional growth and increasing resilience as they gained experience through the course.

Within England, certainly, the issue of capacity of the social worker to survive in practice without burning out has attracted a significant body of interest (Jones et al., 2012; Trevithick, 2014). Current understandings of resilience tend to mainly focus on the psychological resources of the individual worker (Kinman & Grant, 2012). Resilience is a positive construct and within social work context, has been given a protective factor engendering well-being (Bonnano, 2004) and linked to emotional and social competencies (Kinman & Grant, 2011). Trevithick (2014) takes a very positivist stance, based on neuroscience and the work of Damassio (2006) and Le Doux (2012). Le Doux saw the answer to counteracting the managerialist tide in health and social care lay in promoting emotional intelligence to assist social workers' to manage their emotions within the social, political and cultural context they work in.

There seems to be a connection with emotion management and being a professional as the students learnt to 'govern' themselves on placement. Being emotionally intelligent involves being able to control one's emotions, being able to identify others' emotions and being able to manage emotional situations effectively (Goleman, 1995). As social work students learning to be professionals, their issues around their sense of self, student self and professional self was interesting particularly because their emotional experiences and reactions were part of how they constituted and were constituted by their professional self on placement. For Bedoe et al. (2018) and

Jansen (2017) social work profession needs to allow 'the newcomers to be newcomers'.

The importance of practice learning should not be underestimated by all concerned including the students, their practice teachers/assessors, the different organisations or agencies involved as well as the academic staff supporting students during placement disruption and breakdown (Parker & Bradley, 2010). Drawing on incidents that students had reported back after placement to placement tutors upon returning to university, Usher (2009) suggested, that experiential learning on vocational courses can sometimes be used as a 'domestication' exercise. This underlines that there are cultural differences between education and practice settings (Eraut, 2000 & 2007; Sim et al., 2003).

However, although there is an acknowledgement of the social and holistic aspects of learning, there is still an assumption of a student being viewed as an agentic individual who can change and learn as well as an implied insightful goal of self-fulfilment (Eraut, 2007). Much of this knowledge is acquired informally and is taken for granted as people are unaware of its influence on their behaviour (Eraut, 2007). An understanding of organisational culture helps to explain experiences in social and organisational life and enables a better understanding of oneself (Schein, 2010). The common understanding is that placement learning also involves acceptance into the profession's culture, and by the professional community. This may include having to internalise accepted values and norms of that culture. Clouder (2006), while studying student learning on health care placements, recognised that current discourses of care were about professional detachment and altruism. She discussed how these accepted discourses could be challenged by personal experience and how in working through these 'threshold' experiences, students could learn about themselves and others and see the issues in a different, re-conceptualised way.

Bogo et al. (2012) determined that field educators in Canada consistently agreed on what constituted 'outstanding', 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' student performance. However, their decision-making criteria were often based on personality characteristics and not on explicit skills (Bogo et al., 2014). Fortune et al. (2006) also raised the question as to whether practice educators' or field educators' ratings of students' preparedness for practice were mostly based on the relationship with the student rather than on the students' skills.

Limitations

This is a small-scale mixed methods study that does not claim generalisability beyond the specific context in which this research took place. This study had limited scope for discussions on the quality of experiences such as the role of supervision, induction and continuous professional development within the wider UK context. Furthermore, the aim of the study was to solely capture views and reflections from students at the two participating HEIs. Collecting the views from other stakeholders such as placement tutors, practice assessors in the field would broaden the

perspective. However, the insights presented may offer further readers the opportunity to use their existing professional and experiential knowledge to consider the value of the research and its relevance to their situation, thus promoting transferability of the findings.

Conclusions

The study reported here is a mixed methods investigation into the perceptions of undergraduate social work students in two universities in England of how they become ready for the workplace upon graduation. A mixed method research synthesis of the literature, pre-and post-test surveys and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. In answering the question "*How do social work students perceive they become ready for practice and to practise?*", the findings indicate that students understand the profession of social work to be stressful and demanding and they consider that social work students need to possess resilience, based on certain attributes, to become ready for practice as students', and to practise as qualified social workers'. Space for personal growth and development was seen as important by the students in helping to be prepared for the realities of the challenging social work settings in which they will work.

This readiness, from the perspective of students, is a journey based on the development of resilience throughout their course, the capability of performing certain fundamental tasks and the capacity for critical reflection that supports their being able to link theory to practice and deepen understanding of their practice. Practice learning experience is seen as fundamental to supporting a successful journey, but what is seen as inaccessible or inhospitable placement experience both tests and supports the development of resilience and necessary skills, but can fundamentally disrupt the journey. Skills days, are perceived as useful but their value can be limited through students not immediately recognising their relevance, or not paying enough attention to instrumental skill development and the curriculum overall not providing a coherent pathway that supports students to be able to 'fit things together'.

Recommendations

The findings of this study suggest the following areas for consideration:

- Readiness for practice is viewed by students as a journey and therefore by implementing scaffolding support into the induction of social work students into their placement experience, would facilitate a smoother transition into practice. This relies on close relationships between social work educators and employers during the qualifying period.
- The skills days' component of the curriculum should be reviewed in order to develop and better target learning opportunities to increase functional skills and critical reflection abilities to enhance perceived self-efficacy of social work students across the three years of the undergraduate degree. This promotion

of confidence would help students to develop a professional social work identity and feel more ready for practice.

- Educators and practice assessors may need to look at the holistic readiness for practice journey and look at creative approaches of enhancing personal growth and development alongside resilience strategies before students' first social work placement, provide ongoing support throughout the course in preparation for professional life.
- Practice educators should consider developing strategies to reduce potential inaccessibility experienced by students within the organisation. Practice educator courses could also seek to accommodate this aspect on the training schedule to ensure practice educators reflect on their immediate working environment and what organisational factors may impact on a student's learning.
- Social work programme designers should explore the right vehicle and approach for creating a safe environment to allow exploration, emergence and development of self within the curriculum. This would allow scope for including elements of personal growth and development, to enable students to become more resilient practitioners in coping with the emotional challenges of the work and to become ready for the workplace.

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