

Practice Educators' Perspective: Placement Challenges in Social Work Education in England

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Abstract : Practice learning is an important component of social work education. Practice educators are charged with the responsibility to support and enable learning while students are on placement. They also play a key role in teaching students to integrate theory and practice, as well as assessing their performance. Current literature highlights the structural factors that make it difficult for practice educators to create a positive learning environment for students. Practice educators find it difficult to give sufficient attention to their students because of the lack of workload relief, the increasing emphasis on managerialism and bureaucratisation, and a range of competing organisational and professional demands. This paper reports the challenges practice educators face and how they manage these challenges in this context. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with thirteen practice educators who support students in statutory and voluntary social care settings in the Northwest of England. Interviews were conducted between April and July 2017 and each interview lasted about 40 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. All practice educators are experienced social work practitioners with practice experience ranging from 6 to 42 years. On average they have acted as practice educators for 13 years and all together have supported 386 students. Our findings reveal that apart from the structural factors that impact how practice educators perform their roles, they also faced other challenges when supporting students on placement. They include difficulty in engaging resistant students, complexity in managing power dynamics in the context of practice learning, and managing the dilemmas of fostering a positive relationship with students whilst giving critical feedback. Suggestions to enhance the practice educators' role include support from organisations and social work teams; effective communication with university tutors, and a forum for practice educators to share good practice and discuss placement issues.

Keywords : social work education, placement challenges, practice educator, practice learning

Conference Title : ICSW 2018 : International Conference on Social Work

Conference Location : Zurich, Switzerland

Conference Dates : September 13-14, 2018